

Durham E-Theses

Seeing and believing: spiritual discernment and response in john's gospel: a study of encounters with Jesus, with special reference to the story of the man born blind.

Nicholson, Joyce

How to cite:

Nicholson, Joyce (1998) *Seeing and believing: spiritual discernment and response in john's gospel: a study of encounters with Jesus, with special reference to the story of the man born blind.*, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/4831/>

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in Durham E-Theses
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full Durham E-Theses policy](#) for further details.

Academic Support Office, Durham University, University Office, Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HP
e-mail: e-theses.admin@dur.ac.uk Tel: +44 0191 334 6107
<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk>

"Seeing and Believing: Spiritual Discernment and Response in John's Gospel."
A study of encounters with Jesus, with special reference to the story of the man
born blind.

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts
University of Durham 1998

ABSTRACT

In this study I have set out to explore what I would see to be the central significance of the theme of "Seeing and Believing" in the Gospel of John, with special reference to the story of the healing of the man born blind in chapter 9, to consider that man's encounter with Jesus alongside other encounters recorded by John and the various responses to Jesus which we find in this Gospel, and to explore some of the issues and questions raised by any such study of the way in which individuals come to encounter Jesus and see - or not see - who he really is. After a preliminary chapter introducing the theme and glancing briefly at some encounters with Jesus recorded by John, and a second chapter considering the possible relevance to such a study of some recent critical approaches to this Gospel, especially those adopting a "historical-critical" or "literary" approach, I have looked in greater detail at two encounters with Jesus to place alongside that of the man born blind. Chapter 3 explores the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, focusing on the three passages in which Nicodemus is seen in this Gospel, and chapter 4 turns to Pilate's meeting with Jesus and his response to Jesus, the prisoner brought to him. Chapter 5 brings us to the central story for this study, the narrative of John 9 in which the man born blind encounters Jesus and comes to make a response of faith. The final chapter of the study focuses again on the central theme of "coming to see who Jesus really is", and takes up again those questions which have been discussed throughout the study: the question about whether faith is a gift, and the more "Johannine" question about the validity of what might be considered "inadequate" or "partial" faith responses.

"Seeing and Believing: Spiritual Discernment and Response in John's Gospel".

A study of encounters with Jesus, with special reference to the story of the man
born blind.

Joyce Nicholson

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts
University of Durham, Department of Theology 1998

The copyright of this thesis rests
with the author. No quotation
from it should be published
without the written consent of the
author and information derived
from it should be acknowledged.



11 MAY 1999

Thesis

1998/

NIC

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Many people have supported and encouraged me during the three years in which I have been engaged in this study. My supervisor in the Department of Theology, Dr. Walter Moberly, has been a great encourager - convincing me, even when the pressure of Church work was considerable, that I would eventually complete the task ... and offering good advice and real support. Dr. Stephen Barton, who had taught the course on John while I was training for ministry, offered advice and encouragement during Dr. Moberly's sabbatical leave. I shall always be grateful for the teaching and advice I received from staff in the Department of Theology and from Dr. Philip Luscombe in the Wesley Study Centre during those two years in Durham; they helped a middle-aged teacher of English to prepare for a very different sort of work!

Colleagues in the Richmond Hill Circuit and in the Leeds District of the Methodist Church have given gentle encouragement, and the congregations at Cross Gates and Stanks have lived for three years with their minister's enthusiasm for John's Gospel without complaint and have been really supportive. I am grateful for the extra two weeks away from Circuit work which made it possible for me to complete the work.

I have been very grateful for the support of many friends, who have not grown tired of this thesis. Friends in France, where most of this work has been done, have shown interest and concern - even chopping their wood at a different time to give me peace! Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank Bob, my husband, who has never stopped believing that I could complete this work, and has given me so much freedom from other responsibilities and domestic chores that I have managed to do so.

STATEMENT OF COPYRIGHT

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without their prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

CONTENTS

	page
Introduction.	2
Chapter 1. Seeing and Believing in the Fourth Gospel - some preliminary thoughts.	6
Chapter 2. Recent approaches to John's Gospel - "historical-critical" and "literary".	23
Chapter 3. "Seeing and Believing" - Nicodemus. John 3: 1-21, 7: 45-52, 19: 38-42	51
Chapter 4. "Seeing and Believing" - Pilate. John 18: 28 - 19: 16a	79
Chapter 5. "Seeing and Believing" - the Man Born Blind. An Examination of John 9	107
Chapter 6. Coming to See who Jesus Really Is. Encounters, Responses, Questions	146
Bibliography	165



"Seeing and Believing : Spiritual Discernment and Response in John's Gospel".

A study of encounters with Jesus, with special reference to the story of the man
born blind.

Introduction : an attempt to clarify something of the inspiration behind this
work, the purpose in writing, the range of the study and the argument to be
proposed.

The inspiration behind this work, I think, was twofold. The initial enthusiasm to explore the theme of Spiritual Discernment in this particular way was a response to the Biblical Theology course taught by Dr. Walter Moberly in Durham - and part of one particular lecture when the story of the man born blind in John chapter 9 came alive for me in a new way. There was also a growing desire to spend more time with this Gospel of John - a desire already born during my studies as a candidate for ordained ministry, but nurtured and encouraged by the course on John taught by Dr. Stephen Barton in Durham. Since my first year in full-time ministry was one in which John's Gospel was the controlling Gospel in our lectionary, there was much to encourage my continuing fascination with this subject and with this Gospel; much of this work was fed by the experience of weekly engagement with the text of this Gospel in preparation for Sunday preaching - and the Sunday preaching, I trust, was fed by the ongoing study of the Gospel and of this particular theme.

I found myself especially drawn to the whole area of how John shows us individuals "coming" to Jesus and some of them responding in a positive way, coming to "see" Jesus for who he really is - and having gained that insight, that discernment, coming to make a response of faith. I also came to recognize more clearly that we also have presented to us in this Gospel some characters who do not or will not "see" Jesus at all, and some who "see" only a little and therefore are not in a position to respond as fully as others. The more I looked, the more fascinated I became with the study of these responses and the characters making them - and the whole theme of "seeing and believing", of discerning who Jesus is and responding with some sort of faith commitment. I began to wonder whether this might be, in fact, a central issue in this Fourth Gospel, and one that could perhaps be identified with the Gospel writer's stated purpose in presenting his account of the things that Jesus did, that they were written ... "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20. 31). Might it be that one of the central themes of this Gospel of John is concerned with the way in which individuals (and groups, perhaps) respond when they meet Jesus : some of them coming to see with the eyes of faith that he is the Son of God, others proving themselves to be either unwilling or unable to see his divine nature, and some who might be regarded as occupying a "middle ground", with some measure of discernment - if a "middle ground" position is at all possible in the eyes of the writer of this Gospel? It did seem a subject - and a premise - worth exploring further.

Central to all my earliest thinking on this subject was the story from chapter 9 of the man born blind who receives his sight; this character, and the way in which he comes to "see" and "believe", had exercised my imagination for some time. I began to look at some of the other characters who are shown meeting Jesus in this Gospel - and making comparisons and contrasts with the blind man and his response. Over and over again I found characters having to make decisions about Jesus and his words and his deeds, having to decide how to respond to him. I also discovered more and more that this is a Gospel full of the language of seeing and believing, from the Prologue's words about beholding the glory of the Word made flesh to those words quoted earlier from the end of chapter 20 regarding the writer's purpose. It seemed to me that it would also be a valuable exercise to examine how others had perceived this story from chapter 9 and its central character in their own study of this Gospel of John, for I had also come to realize just how many scholars had already engaged with the central characters and with what they saw to be the central issues of this very special Gospel.

So I hope in this study to explore the theme of "Seeing and Believing", with special reference to the story of the man born blind as it is recorded in chapter 9 of John's Gospel: to examine and explore some of the issues and questions about blindness and enlightenment which are encountered in such a study - including two of the related issues concerning the nature of faith which I have encountered in these first years of pastoral ministry, to look at this character of the blind man alongside other characters in the Gospel who meet with Jesus - in

order to make comparisons and contrasts with that blind man, to examine the story itself in some depth within its context in this Gospel and to explore how far this story recorded in chapter 9 might be seen as a "picture" of the whole Gospel. In all of this, I would hope to keep in mind the depth of Johannine irony and its relevance to any study of this Gospel and its themes. Thus I hope to begin to address the question of how important this theme of "Seeing and Believing" really is in the work of this Evangelist - and to suggest that it is, in fact, a central theme which the story told in chapter 9 illustrates clearly, as the man born blind not only gains physical sight but also discovers what it means for him to "behold the glory" of the Word made flesh.

First of all, I shall take a preliminary look at the related themes of "seeing and believing" in this Gospel of John, at the way in which these themes are often significant issues in our study of the ways in which the characters introduced in this Gospel meet with and respond to Jesus, and at the way in which these same issues raise interesting and important questions about the whole nature of faith and the sort of faith responses which men and women in every age come to make - or not make - to God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1. Seeing and Believing in the Fourth Gospel - some preliminary thoughts.

The related themes of "Seeing" and "Believing" may be viewed as issues of central significance in this Gospel of John, themes which occur again and again, issues which are often at the centre of our study of characters in this Gospel, issues which raise interesting questions about the nature of faith and the responses which men and women make - or do not make - to the revelation of God's love which they see - or do not see - in Jesus.

Studies of the vocabulary employed in this Gospel bear out the premise that these are central themes. Statistics which are given in Raymond Brown's study of John's vocabulary¹ - and which are confirmed in work done by others, e.g. Stibbe² and by Lindars³ - make this clear. Brown cites the verbs of "seeing" - *blepein* used 17 times, *theasthai* 6 times, *theorein* 24 times, *idein* (*eidon*) 36 times and *horan* 31 times, and the verb "to believe" *pisteuein* used 98 times - in each case representing a far greater frequency of use in John than elsewhere in the New Testament. Like other words such as *menein* - to stay or to remain, and *kosmos* - the world, the verbs of "seeing" and "believing" are central to John's vocabulary and a glance at a biblical concordance bears out the truth of Brown's work. Over and over again in this Gospel we find these words - sometimes together, sometimes apart. When two of John's disciples ask Jesus where he is staying, Jesus invites them to "Come and see" (1. 39), and soon

after, when Nathanael asks Philip whether anything good can come out of Nazareth, Philip's reply is "Come and **see**" (1. 46) - and Jesus' conversation with Nathanael is full of the language of seeing (1. 48-51). Here, in what is surely a significant episode, Jesus speaks about Nathanael coming to believe because Jesus said that he saw him under the fig tree and suggests that Nathanael will "see" greater things, and in the words of Jesus about the angelic traffic between the earth and an opened heaven we have a reference to "the Son of man" which anticipates the title by which Jesus will speak of himself to the man born blind in chapter 9. After the feeding of the multitude, when the people followed Jesus across the sea to Capernaum, one of the questions they put to Jesus is: "Then what sign do you do, that we may **see**, and **believe** you?" (6. 30) Thomas says to the other disciples who claim to have seen their risen Lord: "Unless I **see** in his hands I will not **believe**" (20. 25), and eight days later Jesus asks him: "Have you **believed** because you have **seen** me?" (20. 29) From the beginning of the Gospel, as the Prologue speaks of the coming of Jesus, we are told that "to all who received him, who **believed** in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1. 12). Jesus urges: "**Believe** in God, **believe** also in me" (14. 1), and some do - like our formerly blind man: "Lord, I **believe**" (9. 38), and Martha: "Yes, Lord, I **believe** that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world" (11. 27), and the "other disciple" who, when he reached the tomb first, went in "and he **saw** and **believed**" (20. 9). The language of "seeing" and "believing", then, can be seen to permeate this Gospel of John.

We ought at this point, perhaps, to take note of the words which follow Thomas' declaration of faith "My Lord and my God!" and Jesus' words to him, in the question form we noted above: "Have you **believed** because you have **seen** me?" Here, following the climax to the story of Thomas - and near what may well have been the end of the Gospel - Jesus utters words which might seem to run counter to our argument, for after that question to Thomas Jesus says: "Blessed are those who **have not seen** and yet **believe**." The Gospel writer is surely here looking forward to those, in the generations after these eye-witnesses, who will come to believe because of the word of the Gospel record; we might recall again his own stated purpose in 20. 31. We do not need to assume that in this "beatitude" John is belittling the importance of the Resurrection appearances, as Bultmann seems to suggest when he speaks of the Easter stories being able to claim only a "relative worth", since fundamentally the disciples "ought not to need" the appearance of the Risen Christ which is a "concession" to their weakness⁴, or that he is ascribing an inferior sort of faith to Thomas because he had the benefit of "seeing" the Risen Christ. It would seem that both groups, the contemporary "eyewitnesses" and those who were to follow, are to be regarded as "blessed" and as knowing the joy of the Resurrection. We might perhaps regard the first group as having known the "blessing" of seeing Jesus with the physical sight of their eyes - and the second group as knowing the "blessing" of coming to "see" Jesus with the eyes of faith, a new and different sort of "seeing" and "believing". Brown would seem to agree with this view of things - for he interprets the contrast in

verse 29 as existing between "two types of blessedness" rather than between blessedness (29b) and an inferior state (29a).⁵

These related issues of seeing and believing are of considerable importance in any exploration of the encounters which John records between Jesus and those whom some have seen as the "odd collection of characters"⁶ whom John brings together in this Gospel. Some characters come to Jesus, seeking answers to questions, while others find that Jesus takes the initiative in the encounter. In every case, the response which the character makes to Jesus is important; some find themselves making a response of faith, others do not get that far, although they are clearly influenced by what Jesus says and does - and some reject Jesus and all that he stands for. We look briefly now at some of those characters; others will receive a fuller treatment in later chapters, particularly Nicodemus and Pilate - alongside of the central character for this study, the man born blind.

We begin with the Samaritan woman and her encounter with Jesus - a meeting which has already interested many scholars. Some have explored it as a biblical "type-scene", in which a leading figure meets his future wife at a well, like Isaac and Jacob and Moses whose "well-encounters" are described by Robert Alter⁷. Such an exploration is interesting in the context of "encounters", for we might see here the way in which the pattern of finding a "partner for life" is given a surprising twist, for the woman does find here the beginning of a relationship which might prove to be life-long and life-changing - although not in the same way as those earlier women involved in well encounters. Sandra

Schneider uses this whole background in her presentation of a feminist interpretation of the passage⁸. Barrett suggests that it is probably correct to say that the woman is a traditional figure "treated by John symbolically - better, perhaps, representatively"⁹, with reference, presumably, to the wider Christian mission to the Samaritans. We attempt here simply to focus on the woman's encounter with Jesus - and the nature of her response. Unlike Nicodemus in the preceding chapter, who "came" to Jesus, this woman simply comes to the well and finds that Jesus, an unknown Jew, is already there. She makes no approach to him - in fact, she is surprised when he asks her for a drink, for, John explains, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (4. 9) - or, if we take the alternative interpretation of the verb, "Jews do not use [vessels] together with Samaritans". As they talk, as Jesus offers her "living water", as she discovers that he knows all about her, we can follow the way in which she gradually comes to understand more and more about the "thirsty Jew"¹⁰ who has spoken to her. As more and more about this stranger is revealed to her, at each stage of the revelation, "as the light of understanding begins to break, the Samaritan woman shows herself ready to receive it."¹¹ Her own words bear out the progress she is making as she listens and receives: "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?" (4. 12) "Sir, give me this water" (4. 15); "Sir, I perceive you are a prophet" (4. 19); then, as she can keep it to herself no longer, but goes to tell the folk in the city "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (4. 29). All that we encounter in John's account of this meeting suggests a positive response to Jesus; we are surely left with the sense that this woman has "seen" something, at least, of the

true nature and identity of the one who met her at the well - and although her last recorded words here are in the form of a question - "Can this be the Christ?" - we again have the sense, surely, that she is at least on the way to faith, that this "well-meeting" had changed her life. Barrett, who only describes the woman as "half-convinced"¹² as she goes to the city, reminds us, however, that because they rely on her report "many believed", and that many more came to Jesus and later came to confess him to be "the Saviour of the world". (4. 39-42) Here we see linked not just "Seeing and Believing" but "Seeing and Believing and Witnessing" ... and it may well be that these **three** themes will be seen together again as we pursue our exploration of this Gospel.

We might glance now at another woman - for John allows the women in his Gospel record to play a real part. In that family group from Bethany we find Mary and her sister Martha - and in chapter 11, the chapter which tells of the raising of Lazarus, we find Jesus' conversation with Martha. She goes out to meet Jesus, and says to him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you". (11. 21-22) From this awareness of the relationship between Jesus and the Father, Jesus leads her on; she speaks of her belief in a resurrection "at the last day" (11. 24), Jesus declares himself to be "the resurrection and the life", assuring her that those who believe in him will live, even though they die and that those who live and believe in him will never die". (11. 25-26) At the centre of this encounter, then, is the need to believe in Jesus. When he challenges her: "Do you believe this?" Martha is able to make what sounds like

a real declaration of faith ... "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world." (11. 27) This, surely, is what John wanted for the readers of his Gospel which was written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name". (20. 31) Martha, as a result of what she has seen and heard, is able to make that declaration of faith - although commentators do not agree on the nature of that confession. Some see Martha's words here as representing real faith: Lindars speaks of her words as "the climax of the theological section of the chapter", confirming "her acceptance of his teaching on the Resurrection"¹³, and Culpepper says that of the two sisters Martha is here the one with "discerning faith".¹⁴ Raymond Brown, on the other hand, suggests that throughout the incident involving her we see that Martha believes in Jesus "but inadequately" - that "in vs. 27 she addresses him with lofty titles, probably the same titles used in early Christian professions of faith" but that later, verse 39 shows that she "does not as yet believe in his power to give life", that she regards Jesus as "an intermediary who is heard by God" but does not understand that he is "life itself"¹⁵; he goes on later, as he says, to "oversimplify" when he suggests that Martha's difficulty is that "she does not realize the full force of 'the one who is to come into the world'; she does not fully understand that the light and the life have already come into the world."¹⁶ Martha, then, is either one of "discerning faith" or one whose faith has not yet matured into the adequate faith that John seeks for his readers, depending upon which school of thought we follow. It is surely, however, an expression of

belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God - even if the one who utters the words does not fully understand the full potential of the words she utters.

A very different response to Jesus is seen in the lame man whose story is told in chapter 5. Here is an interesting episode in John's story - one which, as Barrett points out, provides "particularly good evidence"¹⁷ (as does chapter 9) for those who see the Gospel as written on "two levels" - more of this later, in our next chapter. Not surprisingly, many commentators link the two healing stories - and the characters in them - and draw comparisons and contrasts. The lame man is often seen as a dull man, whose "crotchety grumblings about the 'whippersnappers' who outrace him to the waters betrays a chronic inability to seize opportunity"¹⁸, and sometimes as an ungrateful wretch who does not hesitate to "inform" the Jews, as soon as he knows Jesus' identity, although Lindars appears to treat him more kindly, defending his reply to Jesus in v.7 as possibly "quite dignified and free from bitterness"¹⁹, and suggesting that, although his "telling" the Jews always seems ungrateful to modern ears, it is by no means clear that John imagined that the man was deliberately betraying Jesus to his enemies, since the dispute could only be settled, and his own position cleared, by a discussion between Jesus and the Jews.²⁰ Most commentators, however, are much less generous to this man, who did not ask to be healed - and shows no evidence of any response to Jesus at all. Many draw very clear comparisons and contrasts between this man and the blind man of chapter 9. Barrett sees both similarity and contrast between this sick man and the blind man; "the latter takes a sturdy part in the proceedings, and

eventually comes to complete faith in Jesus, whereas the former is a complete pawn."²¹ Carson is no less unkind to the lame man: "in terms of initiative, quick-wittedness, eager faith and a questing mind, this invalid is the painful opposite of everything that characterizes the wonderful character in John 9".²² We have here, then, a rather unattractive figure who, even when he is the beneficiary of a healing "sign", makes no real response to Jesus - who might well represent for John "those whom even the signs cannot lead to authentic faith".²³ Is it that this man has eyes, but does not "see"?

The lame man, as an individual, makes no response of faith. Throughout this Gospel of John, of course, we hear of one group of people who are closely associated with what Culpepper calls "the response of unbelief"²⁴ - some of whom become, in fact, more and more hostile to Jesus - and that is the group usually referred to by Johannine scholars - following the Gospel writer - by the term "the Jews". The prologue prepares us for the fact that while some would receive Jesus and believe, others would reject him (1. 11-12), and throughout the Gospel we see the truth of that displayed - for while some **do** come to faith, and others come close to it, there are others who refuse to "see" what is right before their eyes. They ask many questions - of John the Baptist (via the Pharisees 1. 19), of Jesus himself (2. 18), of the lame man (5. 12) and of the blind man and his parents (9. 13-26) - and yet nothing they hear in reply to their questions, and nothing they see as they watch Jesus at work convinces them that Jesus is the Son of God. We will hear more about the important role they play in the story of the man born blind in a later chapter, but it seems clear that

John wants us to realize that there are some who simply will not - or cannot - "see", and therefore will not - or cannot - come to believe in Jesus.

It might be useful to keep that idea in mind as we turn from this preliminary glance at the way in which the issue of "seeing and believing" is a central one in our exploration of John's presentation of characters in this Gospel and their encounters with Jesus, to an equally brief and introductory glance at the way in which any real exploration of the "seeing and believing" issue raises interesting questions about the nature of faith and the nature of the responses which men and women make (or do not make) to the revelation of God's love which is manifested in Jesus. Two questions in particular have been very much in the mind of the present writer, and have become very real issues in thinking through a variety of pastoral situations in the course of these first three years of full-time ministry. The first is the question about whether faith is "given", whether it is a gift "given" to some and not - or not so readily, or so obviously - "given" to others a question, really, about how much "faith" has to do with the initiative of God, and how far it has to do with the response of a man or a woman to God. The second is, perhaps, more directly related to this Gospel of John where issues so often seem to be seen in terms of "black" or "white", where it sometimes seems as if a complete and unquestioning confession of faith is the only one that is at all acceptable - and anything else might just as well be denial - if that is not putting it too bluntly the question about whether the Gospel suggests or denies that God has time for those who

only believe a little - or are not entirely sure. Does it have to be all - or nothing?

The first question is, perhaps, not so narrowly a "Johannine" issue - whether faith is a gift, and if it is, whether it is always given to those who seek it ... whether an individual can be held responsible if they don't appear to be able to believe. We may find ourselves appealing to other parts of Scripture as we explore the question, but we can begin with some very clear hints or pointers from this Gospel of John - which sometimes would seem to suggest that faith is very much about God's initiative, God's "drawing" of individuals; in the discourse which follows the feeding of the multitude, for example, we find John there recording Jesus as saying: "All that the Father gives me will come to me" (6. 37), and then ... "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (6. 44) and then ... "This is why I told you that no-one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father". (6. 65) This whole area of thought has been the subject of much scholarly debate within Johannine studies. We find Bultmann considering these references in John to the Father's "drawing" and to the believer's "coming" to Jesus - and then concluding: "The Father's 'drawing' does not precede the believer's 'coming' to Jesus - in other words, does not take place before the decision of faith, just as Paul's 'being led by the Spirit' does not mean being carried along willy-nilly by the Spirit, but is the decision of faith, the decision to surrender to God's demand and gift."²⁵ Kummel, too, wrestles with these sayings and speaks of God taking the "first step", leaving man to take the "second step"; John, Kummel says, knows that

faith "rests solely on God's working", but knows likewise "that God allows us the freedom to let his work occur through us or to reject it".²⁶ This is a debate to which we will return in this study, one which raises questions about how far an individual is responsible for, and in control of, their own response to God - if no-one can come to Jesus unless the Father chooses to "draw" him, in the language of John.

We might also look at other places in the Gospels where it seems to be suggested that men and women are not really in control of whether they "see" or do not "see" the things which might lead them to faith. Perhaps one of the best known of these is Luke's account of the post-Resurrection journey to Emmaus in chapter 24. As the two disciples walk and talk together on the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, the risen Jesus joins them, but, we are told, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (v. 16). Jesus asks them about their dejection, hears their account of events, expounds the Scripture passages which speak of himself - and then, when he later sits at supper with them and he blesses and breaks the bread, we are told "their eyes were opened" (v. 31) before he vanished from their sight. Were those disciples at all to blame for their lack of sight when the writer says clearly that their eyes were "kept from recognizing him"? Did they play any part in what happened when their eyes "were opened", or was this purely and simply the action of God at one particular moment in time and quite beyond their control? In the more general view, if faith is a gift of God, given or withheld at his choice, what is man's role? If faith is really a man or a woman's response to God's initiative, are they

always free to make that response? When the Gospel is preached, and the offer of God's love made plain, why do some respond and others appear not to be moved? Is it that, in the Johannine language we considered earlier, they are not being "drawn" by the Father - and why would God choose to "draw" some and not others, if his love is for all "the world"? (3. 16) If we are thinking particularly about the way in which characters do or do not make a response to Jesus in this Gospel of John, how far are "the Jews" who do not respond responsible for their lack of faith? Are they made to carry a "burden of unbelief", as Culpepper suggests?²⁷ If we are thinking more generally about all human responses to God, do we need to ask whether there is a certain tension that we have to live with here - a tension between God's initiative and human response - and that we do not have to see it as a straightforward alternative between what might be seen as God's manipulation of men and women on the one hand or simply human activity independent of God and his grace. This is not to provide an answer to the question - to which we may return before the end of this study - but to open up the question as one with which men and women struggle, as they seek to understand the nature of faith and the way in which individuals respond to God, some "seeing and believing", and others having a much harder job to make sense of it all.

The second question raised by the "seeing and believing" theme, which is perhaps more directly related to a study of this particular Gospel, is the question of whether an individual can be thought of as a believer if their faith response to Jesus is not as whole-hearted as that of the blind man in John 9 or

the "other disciple" in John 20. In this Gospel of John, so full of pairs of opposites - light and darkness, truth and falsehood, above and below, spirit and flesh - issues so often seem to be presented in terms of "black" and "white", that one is left wondering whether any faith response which is not complete is by nature inadequate and therefore invalid. This is a question which the present writer has met over and over again in pastoral ministry, for many individuals only come to a complete confession of faith by way of partial commitment and partial, often questioning, belief - and some, very honest and earnest seekers after God, never actually arrive at the sort of faith which John desires for his readers. They often want to ask the question about the validity of their "inadequate" faith response: "Will it be alright" or "Will God understand - if I'm not really sure?" Is it enough that a man or a woman is "on the way" to faith, honestly seeking - or is anything short of a full confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, viewed as much the same as denial? In the light of our study of this Gospel of John, we might ask this question of some of the characters we meet in the Gospel - perhaps especially of Nicodemus and Pilate, whose responses to Jesus we will consider in some detail later. The ambiguity associated with the way Nicodemus comes to Jesus, the sense that Pilate is "standing in at least the first glimmering of the day's light"²⁸ - are these signs of hope, or pointers to inadequate responses? Some commentators have seen them as inadequate as far as this Gospel is concerned; Barrett, for example, sees Pilate as "not unfriendly" to Jesus, but he goes on "yet sympathy is, in John's mind, a quite inadequate attitude to Jesus; like Nicodemus (7. 50 f.), Pilate, for all his fair play and open-mindedness is not of the truth; he is of the

world".²⁹ Is there no hope, as far as this Gospel is concerned, for those who have not yet embraced the **whole** truth? As with the first question, the aim here is simply to open up the question as one which can be addressed to this text, and as a question which is significant in any study of the way in which men and women come to faith.

So we have taken our first look at the issue to be explored in our study, the significance of the theme of "seeing and believing" in this Gospel of John, we have taken a first look at the way in which this issue may have an importance in our exploration of the encounters which John records between Jesus and the characters he meets in this Gospel, and we have taken a first glance at some of the questions which might be raised by such an exploration, questions about the nature of faith and the nature of the faith responses which men and women make - or do not make - to Jesus, not just within the pages of John's Gospel record, but in the world of men and women today and every day.

With these issues and these questions in mind, it will soon be time to look more closely at some of those characters in the Gospel - to explore the story of the blind man in chapter 9 alongside others, particularly Pilate and Nicodemus - but first we will take a brief look at the way in which recent criticism has viewed this Gospel, this story of the man born blind and the whole related theme of "seeing and believing". We look especially at the work of some of those who have engaged in recent historical-critical and literary interpretations of this Gospel: first at the work of J. L. Martyn and Raymond Brown and then at

the work of R. Alan Culpepper and Mark W. G. Stibbe. We may find in their very different approaches to this Gospel - and to the story of the man born blind - ideas of value and relevance which will help us in our exploration of our chosen theme.

- 1 Brown, *John* Appendix 1 pp. 501-3, 512-513
- 2 Stibbe, *John* p. 28
- 3 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 88
- 4 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 696
- 5 Brown, *John* p. 1049
- 6 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 145
- 7 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* pp. 51-58
- 8 Schneider, *The Revelatory Text* pp. 180-199
- 9 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 229
- 10 Ramsay, *Religious Language* p. 125
- 11 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 137
- 12 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 228
- 13 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 396
- 14 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 141
- 15 Brown, *John* p.433
- 16 Brown, *John* p.435
- 17 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 250
- 18 Brown, *John* p. 209
- 19 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 215
- 20 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 217
- 21 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 255
- 22 Carson, *The Gospel according to John* p. 243
- 23 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 138
- 24 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 126
- 25 Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* p.28
- 26 Kummel, *The Theology of the New Testament* pp.301-302
- 27 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 130
- 28 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 126
- 29 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 538

Chapter 2. A brief look at the different ways in which some recent "historical-critical" and "literary" approaches to John's Gospel have interpreted the events recorded in chapter 9, and their value and relevance to the present study of the theme of Spiritual Discernment.

As examples of recent works employing what might be called an "historical-critical" approach to a study of John's Gospel, we look briefly at two such studies: J. L. Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* and Raymond E. Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. In both studies the writers are concerned to explore this Gospel in relation to what they believe can be known or discovered about the so-called "Johannine community"; both have interesting arguments to propose, which may have some relevance to the present study - although perhaps both should now be read in the light of the recent publication of *The Gospels for All Christians*, a series of essays by Richard Bauckham and others, which presents an interesting challenge to all such "community" interpretations of the Gospels, including those which present a detailed picture of the "Johannine community" - more of this a little later.

Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* examines in detail the story of the man born blind and the whole narrative of chapter 9, since it provides the most clear and detailed example of Martyn's theory that the Gospel can be understood to have been written on two very different historical

levels corresponding to two very different historical settings - the *einmalig* setting in the historical lifetime of Jesus and the "contemporary" setting in the time of the Evangelist and his church community. Martyn's work appears to begin from a desire to deal honestly with some of the difficulties which the Fourth Gospel presents by looking again at the Gospel's origins and the particular circumstances in which it was written. Having suggested that we need to try to "take up temporary residence in the Johannine community"¹, in order to hear the Fourth Evangelist speak in his own terms, and having spoken of the role of tradition in early Christian thought - a concern for tradition which, he suggests, sometimes means that specific events of the past "lived on with power and somehow mingled with events of the present"², Martyn then presents his own approach to the problems he has encountered. He sees in the presentation of two of the three healing miracles in John something "striking" - that in both the healing of the lame man in chapter 5 and in the healing of the blind man in chapter 9 the miracle story becomes the first in a series of scenes, that what is finally created is a literary genre "quite without counterpart in the body of the Gospels ... a drama".³ He goes on to suggest the possibility of distinguishing between the traditional material in those dramas and those elements which are much more a reflection of John's own interests and experiences - and so he comes to a detailed examination of the events of chapter 9, seeing it as a narrative which rests on Christian tradition, but one constructed in such a way that it is possible to distinguish between those traditional elements and the features which, in Martyn's view, clearly reflect the interests and concerns of John's church community.

When Martyn begins to examine the story in detail, he sees that after the healing has taken place - in the first 7 verses - there is what he designates a "dramatic expansion" of the miracle story in vv. 8 - 41: a "dramatic expansion" which brings into play new characters and new accents, presented as a series of scenes in a drama. Martyn asks whether we can find reflected here some "definite situation" in the life of John's church. He goes on to suggest what that situation might be - and we find ourselves caught up in that suggested scenario of a healing incident in that first century community. It is here that Martyn introduces the one modification necessary for his thesis which is not "minor" and may need defending: this is the "doubling" of Jesus with an early Christian preacher, carrying on the "works" of the Lord; he sees the Evangelist extending the *einmalig* in this way "not because he discovered additional information about what the earthly Jesus did on this occasion, but because he wishes to show how the Risen Lord continues his earthly ministry in the work of his servant, the Christian preacher."⁴ He is then able to present his notion of a drama played out on two levels: on one level, the *einmalig* event in the earthly lifetime of Jesus when Jesus heals a blind beggar, and on another level, an event in which the healing power of Jesus comes through a Christian preacher to a blind Jew, in a situation which threatens expulsion from the synagogue for anyone who confesses Jesus as Messiah - which explains the fear of the man's parents, the man's expulsion and the challenge which comes to him via the Christian preacher to make a decision and a confession of faith. For Martyn, of course, this thesis supports his study of life in the Johannine community and its

relationship with the synagogue - and he gives much time in this work to that relationship and its tensions; one might, however, be forgiven for wondering whether Martyn was entirely justified in maintaining that to interpret John 9 in this way "does not strike one as artificially contrived, nor does it appear to be composed merely to dramatize a theological point of view."⁵ Although his presentation of the idea of a two-level drama has a certain appeal, it does seem to fit his picture of that first century church situation almost too well. When he moves on to speak of his understanding of the Paraclete as the return of Jesus to his own, and suggests that it is in fact the Paraclete who creates the two-level drama, showing Jesus in his glory, there might be the same rather vague uneasiness about whether Martyn has not become almost too committed to his declared purpose - so that he sees everything so much in terms of the first-century situation of John's church and its difficulties with the synagogue. The question might be asked whether Martyn's "two-level stage" in fact restricts the truth of what he is saying to just these two levels - the *einmalig* level and the level represented for Martyn by the church of John's city, or the church of the first century, when it might in reality be a truth for the church in every age and for all time. Might it not be true that such an understanding of the Risen Christ present, or "at home" among his people in the church is a liberating thought for the church in every age? Might it not be that an interpretation like Martyn's theory of the "two-level stage" might in fact distract the reader from the fact that this Gospel does not so much seek to present the life of a particular historical community as to present the central

truth about how men and women come to recognize God in Jesus Christ and thus come to respond in faith?

What, then, is the value of a study like Martyn's for the present exploration of John? It seems clear that such a study is helpful in defining some of the issues which are central to the story of the man born blind - and to the general themes of seeing and believing - but that it might well be too bound up with Martyn's theories about the Johannine community and all of the historical questions surrounding it, and that his very detailed "two-level" reconstruction of the incident and his "doubling" of the characters of Jesus and the Christian preacher might well be open to the charge of contrivance in order to fit his theory. He presents us with what is, in essence, a kind of historian's allegory, which is therefore open to all the problems raised by the allegorical form - not least the danger of making things fit, in this case making the "community" fit the pattern of his "two-level stage". However, Martyn does present us with an interesting way of approaching what he sees as the "problems" of John's Gospel, he does open up the Gospel to another time - although we might wish to think instead in terms of "any time" - and he does focus our attention on this figure of the man born blind and his coming to see and to believe as a result of the ongoing work of the Risen Christ within his church; there is some value for us in this, even if other factors, like Martyn's concentration on and preoccupation with his theories of two levels and the doubling of Jesus with a Christian preacher might limit its value for us for this present study.

When we turn to Raymond Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, we again find ourselves engaged in a study of the life of the Johannine community - in a reconstruction which Brown freely admits "claims at most probability", a study in which he seeks to use what he sees as the "fruitful approach" opened up by the Johannine scholarship of recent years - including the work of Martyn. Here again we might find ourselves a little concerned at the orderliness of the argument. Brown suggests four phases in the life of the Johannine community - the first the pre-Gospel era in which we find the origins of the community, the second the Johannine outlook at the time the Gospel was written, the third phase when the struggles within the community are reflected in the writing of the Epistles - and the fourth and last phase in which we see the final dissolution of the group. Within his discussion of the second phase - that in which the Gospel was written - he mentions Martyn's reference to four groups playing a role in the Fourth Gospel, and then goes on to suggest that there were in fact seven groups (including the Johannine Christians) to be identified here: "the World", the opposition represented by Gentile unbelief, "the Jews" who were still persecuting Johannine Christians, the "Crypto-Christians" who believed in Jesus but were afraid to confess their faith in public lest they be expelled from the synagogue, the Jewish Christian Churches of inadequate faith, the Christians of the Apostolic Churches - represented by Peter and other members of the Twelve and then finally the Johannine community itself.

As far as our blind man from chapter nine and his story is concerned, Brown does have some interesting things to say which might be worth consideration here. It is within the survey of the seven groups mentioned above that we find some ideas which have some relevance to our study. Brown speaks about the group which he refers to as the "Crypto-Christians" - one of the groups who might have believed in Jesus, but whose understanding of Jesus or of discipleship differed from that of the Johannine community. The "Crypto-Christians", as far as Brown is concerned, are those who believed in Jesus but were afraid to confess their faith in public because they feared the possible consequences - particularly the threat of expulsion from the synagogue. Suggesting that John regarded these individuals with contempt "because in his judgment they prefer the praise of men to the glory of God"⁶, Brown refers to the story of the blind man in chapter 9 as an example of someone who "refuses to take the easy way of hiding his faith in Jesus"⁷, one who is not afraid to confess and is willing to pay the price even of expulsion from the synagogue for confessing "that Jesus is from God". He goes on, in fact, to identify the blind man with the Johannine community in a very direct way; the blind man, Brown suggests, "is acting out the history of the Johannine community, a community that would have had little tolerance for others who refused to make the difficult choice that they had to make"⁸. One can see here the way in which the blind man provides an ideal example for those who seek to present the Johannine community in a very positive light as those who were not afraid to risk censure for the sake of their faith - as against those, like the so-called "Crypto-Christians", who were reluctant to risk censure from their

fellow Jews and the possibility of expulsion from the religious life of the synagogue. Brown goes on to suggest that it might be interesting to read John 9 from the point of view of these "Crypto-Christians", and to see that "to them the blind man may not have been a hero but a rather insolent enthusiast who was rude to those who questioned him and enjoyed repartee at the price of real communication"⁹. Such a line of argument would set against the Johannine urging to leave the synagogue a reminder that Jesus was a Jew who had functioned *within* the synagogue, as had James and Peter, and might judge that the expulsion of the Johannine Christians was "just as much the fault of their radicalism as it was of synagogue intransigence"¹⁰; in keeping silent these "Crypto-Christians" would not in their own eyes have been guilty of cowardice, but rather have been "exemplifying prudence" in staying within the synagogue and working from within to "bring the offended synagogue leaders back to a tolerance towards Christians that had previously existed".¹¹

Both the argument and the "counter argument" which Brown presents are interesting - and they point to the way in which such "historical-critical" studies find in the story of the blind man a useful example to illustrate the tensions which they see within the Johannine community with which they are particularly concerned. However, we need to be aware of the danger of such an approach: that the whole episode which John records here may be, as it were, "high-jacked" in order to illustrate the life and tensions of that community life which some seek to reconstruct, and that in the process we may run the risk of losing sight of its essential value within the Gospel - as a miracle of healing, in

which a man comes to "see", both physically and spiritually, and comes also to the sort of faith in Jesus as the Son of God which this Gospel writer desires for all of his readers. Brown, then, presents here a very clear picture of the Johannine community as he sees it, and within that suggested reconstruction the events of chapter 9 have a clear significance, particularly in the debate about the relationship between the so-called "Crypto-Christians" and those who were members of the Johannine community. Here as elsewhere in his study of that community life his argument is often convincing - and yet there are times when one is left wondering whether the picture is not too "structured", whether his historical reconstruction is not too neat and tidy to be truly convincing and again, of course, that larger question about whether such studies might not distract us from the central purpose of the writing of this Gospel, which John has made clear - that the reader might come to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and thereby come to have life in him.

Such "historical-critical" approaches, then, provide interesting reconstructions of the sort of community from which this Gospel might have come to us, and within these studies the story of the man born blind has been given a very real significance as an illustration of the life of that community - whether it be Martyn's two-level stage where a blind Jew is healed by a Christian preacher and faces expulsion for confessing Christ while his parents refuse to get involved, or Brown's picture of the possible relationship between the Johannine community, illustrated by the blind man and his courageous declaration, and the "Crypto-Christians" who were afraid to confess their new faith in Jesus because

they did not want to risk the danger of expulsion from the religious community of the synagogue which had been their spiritual home. Such an understanding of community life - lived against a background of opposition and danger - might also help us to make sense of that question of why this Gospel of John seems always to be requiring such a full and complete confession of faith, as if nothing else can suffice. However interesting such approaches are, they do run the risk of limiting the significance of a story such as that of the blind man to a particular period of time and a particular set of circumstances within the sort of reconstruction which we have already noted that Brown admits "claims at most probability". As they see the story against the background of a community concerned about such issues as synagogue exclusion, there is the danger of "making things fit" the proposed scenario, and in the process confining the significance of the story to that proposed situation and that suggested set of circumstances - so that the blind man at the centre of chapter 9's story **can only be seen as** an ideal example of a member of that Johannine community, or as the blind Jew healed by a Christian preacher of the first century in whom the work of the Risen Christ continues to be done. While these approaches present us with some interesting thoughts and ideas, they do not in their treatment of the story of the man born blind focus **primarily** on the way in which this man comes to "see" and to "believe" - for that is not their intention - and therefore their value as far as our present study is concerned is inevitably limited.

As previously mentioned, 1998 has seen the publication of an interesting challenge to such "historical-critical" studies of Gospel "communities" in *The*

Gospels for All Christians, a book which appeared as this particular study was nearing completion, but which merits at least a brief passing mention, not least because it highlights, and gives clearer expression to, some of the misgivings about this sort of interpretation which have already been mentioned in this study - as it questions the argument upon which work like that of Martyn and Brown is built. In the first chapter of the book, entitled "For Whom Were Gospels Written?", Bauckham presents what he sees as a "perfectly obvious alternative possibility" to the "community" theory and interpretation adopted by Martyn, Brown and others "that an evangelist writing a Gospel expected his work to circulate widely among the churches, had no particular Christian audience in view, but envisaged as his audience any church (or any church in which Greek was understood) to which his work might find its way."¹² Other essays in the collection take up the challenge to what they see as the recent scholarly consensus in a similar way. Richard Burridge, in his essay entitled "About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences", suggests that the Gospels ought really to be viewed as ancient biography - *bioi* - and maintains that such an interpretation might "liberate" us from "the circularity of deducing the communities from the text and then interpreting the text in the light of these (deduced) communities"¹³, highlighting a concern which many have felt about the "community" interpretations, that perhaps these studies were running "too great a risk of finding what is not there or what, by the nature of the evidence, cannot be found", as Stephen Barton puts it in his contribution to the collection - entitled "Can We Identify the Gospel Audiences?" A final reference to this new work might include the essay from

Francis Watson "Towards a Literal Reading of the Gospels", in which he reminds us that "any interpretation of the Gospels that overlooks the obvious fact that the subject of the Gospels is the particular historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth, believed by Christians to be the Christ, the Son of God, is simply misinterpretation"¹⁴, and speaks of the interest Christian theology has, "as an expression of Christian faith", in interpreting the Gospels in their literal sense - "in opposition to the various allegorical readings which cannot or will not understand that the primary intention of those texts is to narrate the historical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the unsubstitutable form of the ultimate and universal significance that Christian faith finds here."¹⁵ This collection of essays presents such an interesting and credible challenge to recent "historical-critical" approaches to John - and the other Gospels - that it will be equally interesting to follow the discussion that must surely follow its publication.

We turn now to consider another sort of approach to John's Gospel which has engaged some commentators in recent years, an approach which applies to the Gospel the sort of critical treatment usually employed in the study of literature. We begin with R. Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel - A Study in Literary Design*, which he declares is an attempt to "make some initial tracings of what the gospel looks like through the lens of 'secular' literary criticism"¹⁶, not as a "challenge" to historical criticism or the results of previous research, but as an "alternative" which may help readers to read the gospel more perceptively by *looking at* certain features - a process to be distinguished from

reading the gospel *looking for* particular kinds of historic evidence. One image is central to his approach - in his desire for us to see the text as a "mirror" in which "readers can 'see' the world in which they live", rather than as a "window" through which "the critic can catch 'glimpses' of the Johannine community", as if the meaning of the text exists on the other side of the window. The meaning, Culpepper maintains, "is produced in the experience of reading the gospel and lies on this side of the text, between the reader and the text."¹⁷

There is much in Culpepper's study which is interesting, and as we look with him at the various "components" of the story as he examines them we find many ideas which are relevant to a study of chapter 9 and the story of the man born blind. When he considers the aspect of "time", for example, he suggests that as one looks more closely at the main episodes in chapters 2 - 12 that "the miracle stories of the synoptic gospels are exploded into major episodes, and there is a progressive conjunction between sign and discourse material"¹⁸, so that he comes to see John 9 with its seven scenes marking "a new level of literary achievement as it ties the discourse material to the sign and weaves the whole into a delightful ironic and dramatic unit".¹⁹ When he moves to consider the "plot" component, he touches more closely on our "seeing and believing" theme - as he speaks of the progressive revelation of Jesus' identity "by the repetitive signs and discourses and the progressive enhancement of metaphorical and symbolic images" so that "each episode has essentially the same plot as the whole".²⁰ So he considers whether Nicodemus or the

Samaritan woman or the lame man will recognize Jesus and thereby receive eternal life, suggesting that "the story is repeated over and over"²¹ so that no-one can miss it, that the ironic background to it all has been provided by the prologue because the reader already knows who Jesus is and that the ignorance or "blindness" of the Jews "gives the story a continuing dramatic force that ties the various episodes together and maintains the tension while various characters accept or reject Jesus."²² Although Culpepper does not deal here directly with the story of the man born blind, there is much in this argument which is relevant to that episode - which tells of the way in which an individual encounters Jesus and in the course of that encounter comes to "see" who Jesus is for himself and to confess his new faith in public - and which is played out against the background of the opposition, the increasing blindness of the Jews who refuse to "see". Might we not also find that in this episode we **do** have the plot of the gospel "in miniature", as in the blind man's story we see what happens when an individual comes to faith? This is another area of study to which we may return. There is one area of thought regarding the plot where we might take issue with Culpepper as he considers the nature of chapter 9 and the first part of chapter 10. He sees this section of the gospel as forming an "interpretive interlude"²³, in which he suggests that the pitch of the hostility seems to drop and the "maneuverings" to arrest Jesus make little progress. Here it might surely be contested whether in fact the pitch of the hostility has really dropped at all, given the way in which the Pharisees speak of Jesus in their dealings with the formerly blind man - when Jesus is described as a sinner who breaks the sabbath and whose origin is unknown. One might argue that

rather than an "interpretive interlude", this is in fact an episode of central importance, an episode which "almost conveys the message of the whole" to use Culpepper's own words.

When Culpepper moves on to speak about character he maintains that the individuality of all the characters except Jesus is determined by their encounter with Jesus, because they represent "a continuum of responses to Jesus"; they are all "particular sorts of choosers" and the choice is "either/or", since all situations are reduced to "two clear-cut alternatives" and all the characters eventually make their choice, with the evangelist - "who stands entrenched within one perspective" - trying to coax the reader to his side.²⁴ We have heard something of this notion already, surely. Among the minor characters Culpepper finds a variety of responses to Jesus: John the Baptist who perceives who Jesus is²⁵, the Samaritan woman who shows herself at each stage ready to receive the "light of understanding" as it breaks upon her²⁶, the lame man who represents those "whom even the signs cannot lead to authentic faith"²⁷, Martha with her "discerning faith"²⁸, if that is how we see her, and Pilate who "seems to glimpse the truth" but finds a decision in Jesus' favour too costly for him.²⁹ Here we find Culpepper's assessment of the blind man as one who, in the course of seven "memorable scenes" comes to "spiritual insight", while the Pharisees' blindness is progressively unmasked. He draws comparisons and contrasts with the other characters in the narrative. So, like the royal official, the blind man is healed "because he obeys Jesus' words"³⁰ - he goes and washes; detailing in chart form the parallels with the story of the healing of the

lame man, Culpepper sees the blind man serving as "counterpart and contrast"³¹ to the lame man. He traces the way in which the blind man resists the threats of the Pharisees and gradually comes to see Jesus as "the man", "a prophet", "from God", and then "Son of man" - and he sees the man's "progressive enlightenment" as similar to that of the Samaritan woman's.³² There is much that is of value here, in Culpepper's presentation of the blind man in relation to other characters who encounter Jesus in this Gospel of John and make their response to him; it is an area of thought to which we will return in the main body of this study.

The blind man, then, is seen by Culpepper in a positive light, as one who comes to see who Jesus is and to make a confession of faith in response to him. We might take issue, however, with Culpepper's assessment of where the blind man comes in his rather structured seven "types of response" to Jesus. He details these categories - the first rejection, the second "acceptance without open commitment" (illustrated by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus - and perhaps Pilate too) and the third "acceptance of Jesus as a worker of signs and miracles" from which characters often fall back into the second, like the parents of the blind man. The fourth response, he suggests, is "belief in Jesus' words - and here he places the Samaritan woman, the royal official and the blind man who "each eventually find faith because they are ready to trust the words of Jesus", a trusting which leads to an "authentic faith".³³ His fifth suggested response is "commitment in spite of misunderstandings"³⁴ (Nathanael, Peter, Philip, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene) and close to this is the sixth

response, that of "paradigmatic discipleship", the "paradigm of discipleship" being the Beloved Disciple, who "abides in Jesus' love, believes and bears a true witness"³⁵ - the seventh response being that of defection and Judas its "infamous paradigm". We might, perhaps, question the placing of our blind man in the fourth category, if that suggests a less adequate response than those of the characters in categories five and six - which is surely suggested by the author's use of language which speaks of a range "between extremes"; it might be argued that his response is, in fact, positive and courageous, worked out against a background of threat and opposition and that even if it is a gradual coming to faith in Jesus, it does culminate in a **real** confession of belief in Jesus as Lord - a confession which he makes knowing that it might cost him dearly. Culpepper might be accused of a somewhat unfair valuation of the blind man's response as against the responses of those whom he considers worthy of inclusion in his categories five and six.

The others areas of Culpepper's study which might be thought to be relevant and helpful to our study of chapter 9 and the theme of "seeing and "believing" come in what he has to say about the use of irony and symbolism in this gospel. He sees what he calls the "foundational" irony of the gospel in the Jews' rejection of the Messiah they so eagerly expected, suggesting that "ironic development of various aspects of the theme of Jesus' rejection permeates the narrative."³⁶ This clearly has a relevance to a study of the events of chapter 9, where the inability of the Pharisees to "see" who Jesus is stands in stark contrast to the formerly blind man's progressive awareness of the identity of the

one who healed his blindness. Then there is the irony surrounding the origin of Jesus, which is an issue in this chapter; on one level there is discussion about Nazareth, Galilee and Bethlehem, but there is another, deeper question at stake - as Culpepper quotes Barrett's comment that whether Jesus is from Galilee or Bethlehem is "a trivial matter in comparison with the questions whether he is $\epsilon\kappa\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omega$ or $\epsilon\kappa\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\ \kappa\alpha\tau\omega$ (8. 23), whether he is or is not from God."³⁷ The question of where Jesus is from is an important one in chapter 9, and an issue to which we shall return in the course of our detailed study of that chapter. Other issues which Culpepper raises here are of significance for us, too - like the whole question, which we have already raised, of how far a man or a woman is in control of what they "see" or fail to see - as Culpepper suggests that Jesus' ministry "will be veiled so that only those to whom it is given to do so may rise to the plateau from which its true meaning can be seen."³⁸ Any study of the theme of "spiritual discernment" needs in due course to pay some attention to such an issue, and it is a subject to which we shall return more than once in the course of this work. His comments on the use of irony in this Gospel end with the interesting suggestion that whereas in other hands irony might become a sword, in the hands of our author it is "more like a net in which readers are drawn to the evangelist's theology and faith (cf. John 21)."³⁹

When he moves on to consider symbolism, it is what Culpepper has to say about the symbolism of light which is of greatest interest to us in our study of John 9. He suggests that, from the beginning, "the gospel 'sings' of the existence of light" since the prologue "links *logos*, life and light so powerfully

that the cluster dominates the symbolic system of the entire narrative." He traces the way in which the symbol of light comes to be completely identified with Jesus by the end of chapter 8, and then in the following chapter, when Jesus gives sight to the man born blind, he says that we find that "blindness and sight, seeing and believing, are used to expand further the symbolic value of light" and to provide "an index to the value of various characters". He goes on to expand this argument very clearly: "The blind man moves from the natural condition of his past upon encounter with Jesus, response to his words, and a washing in water. Sight becomes insight into the identity of Jesus, a willingness to believe, and finally faith. Simultaneously, the Pharisees move from physical sight with its attendant implication of understanding, to ignorance (which is exposed by irony), rejection of Jesus and the man who has accepted him, and finally the sentence of blindness".⁴⁰ There are several valuable pointers in what Culpepper says here to the issues to be considered later in our detailed exploration of the chapter.

Enough has been said to suggest the value of Culpepper's work in any treatment of the theme of "seeing and believing" in this gospel; in his conclusion he again makes clear the importance of the imagery of "seeing" - and of his view of the world within this gospel in which characters are defined by their response to Jesus, their ability to believe and their "progress towards or away from the perspective of the narrator".⁴¹ Although there is so much of value in this sort of approach to the subject, there are one or two important misgivings which need to be expressed. The first has to do with the

whole issue of applying the criteria usually employed in the study of literature to the study of Scripture. In Culpepper's case, his work raises valuable issues and brings interesting insights into such areas as character and plot, and techniques such as irony and symbolism - but there is still the uneasy feeling that such an approach will always encourage the reader to view these areas of study as features in a work of art - like a novel - rather than as part of a work which is, for some at least, a divinely inspired and life-changing work of Scripture. Might one not be missing something in the process - something which cannot easily be defined in these terms, and which has more to do with the way in which the reader might, as a result of the experience of reading the Gospel, come to respond to God in Jesus Christ? The other misgiving has to do with Culpepper's image of the mirror as opposed to the window. He speaks of his dissatisfaction with the approaches which treat the gospel as a window through which the reader can catch a sight of what is on the other side - the ministry of Jesus, the Johannine community - and his preference for the image of the mirror in which the readers can see reflected the world in which they live, so that the meaning is "produced in the experience of reading" and lies "on this side of the text, between the reader and the text".⁴² At the end of his work Culpepper elaborates on what this can mean in terms of openness to the text; it can mean, he says, "believing that the narrator is not only reliable but right and that Jesus' life and our response mean for us what the story has led us to believe they mean."⁴³ One might want to suggest that in fact the really important point is that move which the reader makes when he or she comes to believe that "the narrator is not only reliable but right" - a move which depends

more on the faith response associated with "seeing and believing" the truth about Jesus than the techniques of literary criticism. Both of these misgivings raise a fundamental question about this type of approach. Are we not in danger of losing sight of the central issue, of how in and through the biblical text - and here particularly this Gospel record - the individual reader is able to perceive God: to come to "see" and to believe in the one who is "from God", "from above" rather than from "the world". There are surely considerable difficulties associated with such attempts to look at the Gospel through the lens of secular literary criticism ... as well as the fact that one might just be forgiven for asking whether Culpepper himself does not at times come close to leaving the confines of the world of secular literary criticism when he begins to speak in terms of faith responses to Jesus.

Alongside Culpepper's work, we consider rather more briefly the work of another scholar who has also been engaged in "literary-critical" investigation of this fourth gospel - and who himself has commented on what he sees as "flaws" in Culpepper's approach. Mark Stibbe, in three different volumes at least⁴⁴, has adopted what might be called a "literary-critical" approach to John. It might be interesting to consider what he sees as flaws in Culpepper's approach, since he describes Culpepper's work as "a significant methodological experiment and an extremely valuable contribution to Johannine studies" - applying to Culpepper's own work the very judgment which Culpepper had applied to John's Gospel "magnificent but flawed".⁴⁵ The first "flaw" he mentions echoes a comment we have already made, as he suggests that Culpepper takes it too much for granted

"that a gospel can be studied as if it were a novel"⁴⁶; Stibbe contends that the gospel narratives in fact share much more in the subtleties of ancient Hebrew and Graeco-Roman narratives. The other major problem which Stibbe finds is what he sees as Culpepper's neglect of the historical dimension of the story - so that whereas others, like Martyn, have given emphasis to community history within the fourth gospel, he sees the general tendency of Culpepper's work tending "to obscure the value of the gospel as narrative history and as community narrative".⁴⁷ Stibbe's hope is that his work will help future Johannine scholars to appreciate John "not only as story but as community narrative and as narrative history"⁴⁸ - although, again, we might begin to feel that the "historical" and the "narrative" dimensions are being seen as so much more important than our central issue of how men and women come to "see" God revealed in Jesus Christ within the Gospel record.

Stibbe's work is interesting - although there is not space here to do justice to all that he has attempted in these three studies. In *John as Storyteller* he first presents his theory of "narrative criticism appropriate for research on the Gospel" and then puts that theory into practice in a study of the passion narrative in John 18 - 19. *John*, his commentary on the Gospel in the "Readings" series, is an interesting application of much of the theory he had set out in his first work to the whole of the Gospel - as he sets out to give passage by passage comment on context and structure, form and plot, author, narrator and reader, character and literary devices, making it plain that he does not see John's story as a fictional novel, but sees it as having value in the attempt to

discover the historical Jesus. He speaks of it as "charismatic history", as "historical tradition interpreted creatively and christologically with the aid of the *parakletos*, the Spirit of truth".⁴⁹ It is, he maintains, remarkable for its fusion "of poetry and history, of the universal and the particular", and as poetic history it will come across to readers, now and in the future, as the "regenerative and liberating Word of God".⁵⁰ There is much in this commentary which is of value for our study: for example, as he explores the way in which significant themes are introduced in the Prologue, he deals with the theme of seeing - commenting on the frequency of the use of verbs of sight, and concluding ... "Seeing who Jesus really is becomes an important theme, one which will be used with particular irony, in John 9, the story of the man born blind."⁵¹ This theme is referred to again and again; when he deals with chapter 9, Stibbe speaks of the chapter as "an artfully constructed study of growing insight (the man born blind) and growing unbelief (the Pharisees/Jews)", so that by the end of the story the healed man "has not only had his eyes literally opened, he has also experienced the ultimate vision of the eyes of faith".⁵² When he comes to deal with the plot of chapter 20, he again recognizes that the key question to almost every episode of John has been: "Will characters recognize who Jesus really is?" ... and as he deals with the fact that recognition does not always come easily to the characters in John 20, he links this theme with the theme which particularly interests him, the "elusiveness" of the risen Jesus.⁵³ The third work of Stibbe's to which we have made reference, *John's Gospel*, is a very different work, although still concerned with his fundamental "literary" approach - for here he sets out to "introduce the reader to a variety of

literary readings of the fourth gospel": a reader response approach to John's characterization of Jesus, then a structuralist analysis of the plot, then "an archetypal investigation of its genre", then a "narrative criticism" approach applied to one chapter ... and finally a study of satire using a new literary approach called "the ethics of reception".

Stibbe's work is interesting and refreshing, and he does seem to go a long way towards achieving his stated aim of finding a way of enabling future Johannine scholars to appreciate John "not only as story but as community narrative and as narrative history". What is of real value, too, is that while applying many of the methods of literary criticism to the text, he does not lose sight of the fact that this text is also Scripture - "gospel" which seeks to evoke response. He writes as one whose first academic discipline was the study of literature - an experience shared by the present writer - but also as one who sees John's Gospel as a magnificent work of literature but maintains that "it is also much more", for it is a gospel which demands a *krisis*, a "verdict" about Jesus.⁵⁴ Stibbe's work does recognize, then, that the text is "much more" than a magnificent work of literature, and he does see the central importance of the theme of "seeing who Jesus really is"; we might still, however, regard his work as much more caught up in the study of the text as literature - and as history - than with the ways in which individuals do come to see and to believe.

As far as "literary" approaches to this Gospel are concerned, it seems clear that they can be extremely helpful in focusing attention on various features of the

writing - plot, character, technical devices and so on, but that if they simply explore the text as if it were a work of art, like a novel, they may lose sight of an essential dimension of the writing - that it is Scripture, writing produced to evoke response and commitment, to change lives by introducing the readers to God's revelation of Himself in His Son. Like the "historical-critical" approaches, which we met earlier in the works of Martyn and Brown, they are not primarily concerned with our central question of how those who encounter Jesus come to perceive who he is - how they are enabled to respond to the divine initiative and to come not only to "see" that Jesus is the Son of God - the Messiah, but also to make a response of faith and trust in him, although it is probably true to say that much of what they have to say has a greater value for this enquiry than those "historical-critical" methods. On the whole, however, such "historical-critical" and "literary" studies may sometimes focus our attention on interesting features and ideas in the Gospel - but their value for our study of the responses of individuals to their encounters with Jesus will always be somewhat limited.

We move on now to look in greater detail at the way in which characters in this Gospel encounter Jesus and make their responses to him. Before we come to explore the story of our central encounter told in chapter 9 in greater detail, we consider first two of the characters we might wish to place alongside our man born blind - for comparison and contrast. We begin with Nicodemus, the "man of the Pharisees" and "ruler of the Jews" whose first recorded encounter with

Jesus is found in John chapter 3, in order to examine his response to the teacher he sought by night.

- 1 Martyn, *History and Theology* p. 18
- 2 Martyn, *History and Theology* p. 18
- 3 Martyn, *History and Theology* p. 21
- 4 Martyn, *History and Theology* pp. 29-30
- 5 Martyn, *History and Theology* p. 37
- 6 Brown, *Community* pp. 71-72
- 7 Brown, *Community* p. 72
- 8 Brown, *Community* p. 72
- 9 Brown, *Community* p. 73
- 10 Brown, *Community* p. 73
- 11 Brown, *Community* p. 73
- 12 Bauckham, *The Gospel for All Christians* p. 11
- 13 Burridge, *The Gospel for All Christians* p. 143
- 14 Watson, *The Gospel for All Christians* p. 215
- 15 Watson, *The Gospel for All Christians* p. 217
- 16 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 5
- 17 Culpepper, *Anatomy* pp. 3-5
- 18 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 73
- 19 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 73
- 20 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 89
- 21 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 89
- 22 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 89
- 23 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 93
- 24 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 104
- 25 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 133
- 26 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 137
- 27 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 138
- 28 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 141
- 29 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 143
- 30 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 139
- 31 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 140
- 32 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 140
- 33 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 147
- 34 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 147
- 35 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 148
- 36 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 169
- 37 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 170
- 38 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 173
- 39 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 180
- 40 Culpepper, *Anatomy* pp. 191-192
- 41 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 232
- 42 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 5
- 43 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 237
- 44 Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* (1992), *John* (1993), *John's Gospel* (1994).
- 45 Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* p. 10
- 46 Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* p. 10
- 47 Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* p. 11
- 48 Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* p. 13
- 49 Stibbe, *John* p. 18

- 50 Stibbe, *John* p. 19
- 51 Stibbe, *John* p. 28
- 52 Stibbe, *John* p. 104
- 53 Stibbe, *John* pp. 204-205
- 54 Stibbe, *John's Gospel* p. 135

Chapter 3. "Seeing and Believing" - NICODEMUS - An attempt to examine Nicodemus' response to Jesus - with particular reference to JOHN 3. 1 - 21,

7. 45 - 52 and 19. 38 - 42

As we move on in our study to examine in greater detail the responses of two of the characters in this Gospel to Jesus, in order to consider their responses alongside of that of the man born blind in chapter 9, we begin with an exploration of the response of Nicodemus, a character who only appears in John's Gospel - and then makes only three brief appearances; he is introduced in chapter three where he acts as a dialogue partner for Jesus, reappears in chapter seven where he appears to defend the right of Jesus to a fair hearing when others might have denied it, and then finally, in chapter nineteen, is recorded as coming with Joseph of Arimathea to carry out the required funeral rites for Jesus. Many attempts have been made to examine and assess where Nicodemus stood, so to speak, and what sort of response he was making to Jesus - and some of these, at least, will be discussed in the course of this chapter. The hope is that such exploration of Nicodemus's response may provide interesting comparisons - or contrasts - with the study of Pilate's response, and then, alongside that study, help us to evaluate that response which is central to this work - that of the man born blind whose story is recorded in chapter nine of the Gospel of John.

As we examine in some detail those sections of the Gospel in which Nicodemus appears, it will be interesting, and valuable to our overall scheme perhaps, to see how so many of the themes and areas of interest peculiar to this Gospel of John are caught up in the Nicodemus story - the theme of "misunderstanding", the role of the group referred to as "the Jews" and their leaders, the themes of authority and origin and of how individuals come to experience the "Kingdom of God" or "Eternal Life" ... and the whole subject of how men and women respond to Jesus, how easily they "see" who He really is and how readily they come to a make a response in faith to Him.

We begin by examining those passages in which Nicodemus appears, beginning with what is, perhaps, the best known - the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus in chapter three. Immediately, in the first verse, Nicodemus is introduced as "a man of the Pharisees" and "a ruler of the Jews"; to those who are sensitive to the role played by "the Jews" in John's Gospel, this might seem to align him with those who on the whole are less than sympathetic to Jesus. However, Nicodemus is then described as "**coming**" to Jesus, which might suggest a rather different alignment - for now Nicodemus might be associated in our minds with others who "came" to Jesus; already in this Gospel, in chapter two, disciples have "come" to see where Jesus is staying (1. 39), to be followed closely by Philip urging Nathanael to "come and see" whether anything good could have "come out of Nazareth" (1. 46). "Coming" to Jesus there has very positive overtones - as it does with the official in chapter four and Martha in chapter eleven, for in both of these cases it leads to a response of

faith. We **then** note that Nicodemus is said to come to Jesus "by night". For some this is an indication that John wants us to see Nicodemus' coming at night - perhaps for fear of "the Jews" - as reflecting badly on Nicodemus, or at least suggesting his unwillingness to be seen coming to Jesus, in case coming out into the open means that "he will lose his influence in the exalted quarters in which he moves."¹ Others attribute the night-time visit to other motives; for Bultmann it is more likely that it "is intended to show his great zeal, in the same way as nocturnal study is recommended by the Rabbis", but, above all, that it "allows the Evangelist to fulfil his intention of creating an air of mystery."² Noting that John recalls this reference to night (19. 39), Raymond Brown speaks of its symbolic import; although he recognizes that darkness and night in this Gospel symbolize the realm of "evil, untruth and ignorance", for him, Nicodemus is a character who "comes out of the darkness into the light" - whereas Judas leaves the light to go out into the night of Satan (12. 30)³. For Wayne Meeks, on the other hand, the reference to night-time casts a "certain suspicion" over Nicodemus, because of what is said in the dialogue itself about the division between people who come to the light and those who remain in darkness (3. 19-21); for him, "Nicodemus does *come* to the light, but he is depicted as one who does not perceive the light very clearly, and who is hesitant and unable to make the decisive step from darkness to light."⁴

Already, with only the first verse and a half of the chapter in view then, we are coping with what Jouette Bassler referred to as the "mixed signals" surrounding the rather enigmatic figure of Nicodemus in this Gospel of John.

Bassler's interesting study of these "mixed signals", with its treatment of the ambiguity and the data on Nicodemus which "refuse to fall neatly into place"⁵ may well help us as we try to assess what John wants us to make of Nicodemus and his response to Jesus, because there is much that is ambiguous about this figure, and many of us are left with questions in our minds about how far Nicodemus came to "see" who Jesus is and how far he was able and/or willing to respond to Jesus in faith.

This ambiguity surrounding Nicodemus seems to be ever present as the episode unfolds. He is presented as coming to Jesus believing that Jesus is a teacher come from God - and that seems so positive until we hear why he has come to believe that "for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" and then the declared link with the "signs" reminds us of the verses which precede this meeting, verses which seem to form a "bridge" between the cleansing of the Temple and this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. Here John had made it clear that Jesus would not entrust himself to those Jews who had believed in him because of the signs he did; already there seems to be the implication that this sort of faith, a faith based on signs, is not enough. Bassler looks to this literary context as the only explanation for Jesus' response to Nicodemus - which is initially enigmatic, and subsequently more of a rebuke - because, Bassler maintains, Nicodemus's initial confession of faith in Jesus as a "teacher come from God", although it may not be as profound as Andrew's or Nathanael's, is at least as substantive as Philip's - "him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph". Bassler

suggests that if Nicodemus's profession of faith seems acceptable within the framework of the Gospel, then Jesus' response to him suggests that on another level *inaccessible to the reader* Nicodemus's response is not acceptable; looking back to those verses, Bassler says that Nicodemus "seems to be a representative of those mentioned in 2. 23-25 whose faith is based on the signs" although we may sympathize with the suggestion that "the careful reader is left wondering just what distinguishes Nicodemus's sign-based faith from that of the disciples, whose faith seems to rest, initially at least, on a similar experience of Jesus' miracles."⁶

Comments like these might perhaps lead one to ask whether Nicodemus is judged more harshly than other characters in this Gospel. Bassler indeed speaks of Nicodemus being treated "rather shabbily", and Meeks speaks of the "unbiased reader" feeling quite sympathetic towards him - in fact Meeks sees in Nicodemus's opening statement to Jesus a declaration of faith and suggests that his case is rather closely parallel to that of the blind man healed by Jesus in chapter nine ... who "on the same grounds, viz., Jesus' signs" also declares that Jesus is "a prophet," not a sinner, but "from God". Meeks goes on - "Like that man Nicodemus confesses a faith in Jesus which, if imperfect, at least corresponds to an acceptable first stage of faith as viewed by the Johannine community." He goes on to point out another point of similarity between the two - that, like the 'enlightened' blind man, Nicodemus will defend Jesus before the authorities although he has then to admit that, unlike him (the blind man), "Nicodemus will not go so far as to master the 'fear of the Pharisees' [or,

'of the Jews'] and risk being expelled from the synagogue", and , also, unlike him, Nicodemus" is unable to comprehend the identity of the Son of Man".⁷ It does seem that in these comments from Meeks we may have some possible clues to help us in our understanding of Nicodemus, as John presents him - and in particular the differences between his response to Jesus and that of the man born blind, which may, in turn, help us to understand John's presentation of that character - which had led many to think that Nicodemus is treated rather harshly, or "shabbily". If, for John, recognizing who Jesus is, understanding that he is the Son of God and the Messiah, taking the step of declaring that faith - and being prepared to take risks in declaring that faith - is at the heart of what it means really to "come to Jesus" and to inherit "eternal life", then perhaps, for John, Nicodemus is an example of one who is prepared to go so far - but not far enough. The reference to his coming to Jesus "by night" might then be seen as suggesting the approach of one who does not want to be seen in the company of Jesus, or to have any conversation between them recorded. It might be useful to bear this possibility in mind as we proceed further in our study of this chapter and its encounter - that Nicodemus might be, for the writer of this Gospel, an example of one whose faith is inadequate ... inadequate because, although it springs from a genuine desire to know more about Jesus, it does not lead to a complete confession of belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Whether such a limited or partial response as this might seem to be is at all adequate as far as this Gospel writer is concerned is one of the questions with which we shall grapple as we explore our central theme.

In verse three we find that Nicodemus' "declaration of faith", if that is what it is, is met by what might sound like a warning from Jesus - that no-one will see the kingdom of God unless he or she is "begotten from above", as Brown translates it - although it might be seen not so much as a warning as a deliberate riddle or puzzle introduced to heighten the encounter and the discussion between the two characters. It is understandable that some see this as a rather enigmatic response to Nicodemus, since **he** has not mentioned "the kingdom of God" or "birth" in his opening words. Nicodemus, taking *ανωθεν* to mean "again", rather than "from above", is curious to know how anyone can experience a second physical birth; we then find that this double meaning, and Nicodemus' response, bring us face to face with a favourite Johannine technique - that of "misunderstanding". It is a literary device which we see again and again in this Gospel, with the "living water" in chapter four's meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman and Lazarus' "sleep" in the conversation between Jesus and his disciples in chapter eleven. Nicodemus, thinking about physical human birth rather than a spiritual rebirth "from above", is caught in this web of "misunderstanding", and when he questions Jesus further about how a man can have a second birth from the womb, we find that Jesus' response is not to answer him directly but rather to develop further the notion of what it means to be born "of the Spirit". There is a sense in which Nicodemus is almost doomed to misunderstanding, since Jesus seems to be answering questions which Nicodemus is not asking, and not answering the questions he does ask. Now when Nicodemus asks, "How can this be?", Jesus seems to upbraid him for being a teacher of Israel and not being able to

understand - and proceeds to develop the discourse, speaking about earthly and heavenly things, about the descent and ascent of the Son of man, who is now to be "lifted up".

Is Nicodemus, then, as Stibbe suggests, the "embodiment of misunderstanding"⁸, or is he being used, as other characters are used in this Gospel, to provide a starting-point for teaching and discourse? This is how Culpepper sees it. "As with all of the Johannine misunderstanding", he maintains, "Nicodemus here serves as a foil which enables Jesus to explain his meaning while vaulting the reader to an elevated position of superiority over the character's limited understanding."⁹ Such an interpretation makes one wonder how far Nicodemus ought to gain sympathy, rather than blame, and even if we are to view him as one whose faith is inadequate or in some way insufficient, there are those who see this, too, as beyond his own control - as, for example the argument of Raymond Collins that misunderstanding is not a matter of understanding incompletely or inaccurately, but rather "a basic lack of understanding of the Gospel teaching ... expressive of a lack of faith." He goes on, "Nicodemus has not received the gift of faith"¹⁰ - and perhaps one is led to ask "Why not?", and whether an individual can be blamed for not having faith, or having insufficient or inadequate faith, if the possession of that faith is something outside of their control - if it is a gift which is either given to them or withheld. This is another question which the reader of this Gospel who seeks to explore the theme of "Seeing and Believing" needs to address - and we have mentioned it already - whether all characters share an "even playing field", or

whether only some are "gifted" with sight and faith. We are again and again weighing up the relative importance of divine initiative and human action. We have already in this chapter noted how in the first chapter John speaks of individuals "coming" to Jesus; in the discourse which follows the dialogue with Nicodemus we find John speaking of how the coming of the light makes it necessary for men and women to choose between darkness and light - and telling us that the individual who does what is true "**comes** to the light", so that it can be seen that his deeds have been "wrought in God" (3. 21). Alongside this we might want to consider teaching which would seem to stress the divine initiative, as in the discourse after the feeding of the multitude when John has Jesus say: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (6. 44a). We have already, in an earlier chapter, raised this issue; we will continue to address this whole question of divine initiative and human response as our study proceeds.

After Nicodemus' last question in verse nine we do not hear from him again in the chapter, and the "dialogue" becomes "monologue", as Jesus goes on to speak of God's love for the world and his sending of his Son so that those who **do** believe might have eternal life. In these verses sixteen to twenty-one, as we have noted already, there is a clear division drawn between those who believe - and therefore will know eternal life - and those who do not believe - who are already condemned by that lack of faith "in the name of the only Son of God". It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that John speaks here in terms of light and darkness, suggesting that the coming of the light into the world has already

brought division; the one who "does evil" does not come to the light, but the one who "does what is true" comes to the light - the human action which we mentioned earlier - for his deeds can cope with being seen. We are reminded of the language of the Prologue - and its talk of darkness and light (1. 4-9) ... and its talk, too, of those who received him and those who did not (1. 10-13). What bearing do these verses have on the encounter between Nicodemus and the "Light of the World", as John is later to call Jesus? Is Nicodemus to be praised, or at least acknowledged as some sort of believer or even enquirer because he did "come" to Jesus - or is that "coming" of no avail in the view of this Gospel and its writer because he "came" by night? Is his coming by night a sign that he belongs to the darkness - or should we see him as one who came out of the darkness "into the presence of the true Light"¹¹?

What, then, are we to make of Nicodemus at the end of this encounter in chapter three? It has become increasingly clear that opinions are divided about this "man of the Pharisees", about his motives for "coming" to Jesus under cover of darkness and about his response to Jesus as a result of the encounter. Bassler suggests that "if this were the only scene with Nicodemus, one would have to place him on the side of those whose intentions are good but who are ultimately left in the dark", but then reminds us that this is not the only scene in which this character appears, that "Nicodemus keeps coming back, back to Jesus as well as back into the narrative", and that consequently this text does not provide "the final word" on the figure of Nicodemus.¹² Perhaps it is necessary to proceed to an examination of those other passages in the Gospel

where Nicodemus is seen "coming back" to Jesus before making any final judgment on his response; as far as this chapter three is concerned, however, the reader does seem to be receiving something like the "mixed signals" of which Bassler speaks.

Much of chapter seven is given to John's account of Jesus teaching in the Temple during the Feast of Tabernacles, which comes to something of a climax with his words on the last day of the feast about the "rivers of living water" (7. 38) which are to flow from those who believe in him - and the division among the people which occurred as a result (7. 40-44). It is at this point that the officers go back to the chief priests and Pharisees who chide them for not arresting Jesus and challenge them: "Are you led astray also?" (7. 47) Perhaps to press their point home, they add another question: "Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?" and dismiss the crowd as being "accursed". At this point in the narrative we find that Nicodemus is mentioned again (7. 50) - Nicodemus "who had gone to him before" and "who was one of them". Even with these introductory words one might wonder what John is saying - since the first phrase might seem to re-inforce the impression of one who already has made a move towards Jesus, like others in this Gospel who have made a similar move, while the second phrase would seem to re-inforce the impression that Nicodemus is "one of them" - a Pharisee, and therefore unlikely to break ranks in order to support this Galilean. This second phrase is interpreted thus by Raymond Collins when he says: "Thus there can be no doubt that the evangelist wants his readers to understand that Nicodemus is a

member of the Pharisees' party and a ruler of the Jews"¹³. When Nicodemus speaks, however, it is to question the approach and the methods of his fellow Pharisees in their treatment of Jesus, when he asks: "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" This does not, surely, sound like the words of one who wants to stay "in the shadows" and not get involved in the affair of the Galilean "prophet"; Nicodemus could, presumably, have stayed silent and thus avoided the question and the challenge which now come his way: "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee" - which also carried perhaps the hidden suspicion that, if a "Galilean", he might also have been sympathetic to Jesus' cause. Nicodemus is alone in this challenge to his peers - "a single man who contradicts the united front of the others"¹⁴, as Bultmann sees him.

How, then, are we to see Nicodemus in this his second appearance in the Gospel? Are we to find here any evidence that Nicodemus has moved any nearer to Jesus, any closer to seeing who Jesus is, any nearer to a response of faith? Some commentators clearly want to suggest that Nicodemus does move closer to that response during the Gospel story told by John - and see this incident in chapter seven as marking some movement towards this. So Lindars comments on Nicodemus' words in 7. 50 : "He has been an open-minded enquirer, and now represents a reasonable, unprejudiced attitude in contrast with the hardening opposition of the rest. His final appearance in 19. 39 will show him as virtually a full believer"¹⁵. It is an attractive proposition for those of us who share an instinctive liking for Nicodemus, to think that his

contribution in chapter seven is some sort of step on the road to faith, and yet we need to ask whether there is evidence sufficient to support this interpretation. Nicodemus is seen here to be a man of principle, fair-minded and keen to see justice done, and he does show considerable courage in making a stand in defending Jesus against those who might have denied him a fair trial. The key question is, perhaps, whether there is more to his words than that - and here opinions are divided, and not everyone is prepared to go as far as Lindars. Barrett, commenting on "who was one of them" suggests that "possibly John means that for all his good will and fair-mindedness, Nicodemus remains one of the Jews, not one of the disciples"¹⁶. This point is perhaps illustrated unwittingly by a comment from Raymond Brown who, when he speaks of the sarcasm of verse 52, points to another character's progress towards faith in Jesus. "In i. 46 Nathanael had also scoffed at Jesus' Galilean origins; but he had been honest enough to come and see for himself, and he had found through faith what he had been looking for."¹⁷ Brown goes on to speak of the authorities scoffing Jesus' origins and, when they are invited to hear him, turning a "deaf ear" - and he points to the same theme in chapter nine, when the Pharisees are "blind because they refuse to see". With his comment here on Nathanael he does perhaps remind us of the progress others made in "coming" to Jesus - and by comparison with some of these "disciples", we may wonder how much Nicodemus has progressed towards discipleship.

Bassler again sees "mixed signals" here in chapter seven. In favour of a more positive evaluation of Nicodemus are the words of Jesus in 7. 17 which "seem

to shed light back on Nicodemus' first appearance in the narrative". Jesus says there: "If any man's will is to do [God's] will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" and Bassler comments "In that first appearance Nicodemus confessed Jesus as 'a teacher come from God', and this verse suggests that such a recognition of the source of Jesus' teachings could only have arisen if Nicodemus' own will were properly submerged to the divine will", adding -"That, if true, is high praise indeed"¹⁸. However, Bassler sees other signals which counter such a positive evaluation: the "muttering" of these verses, encompassing both defence and accusation, which not only links these activities with "the perfidy of Israel's wilderness generation" but also suggests "a sort of guarded speech that falls far short, even when it is affirmative of Jesus, of the open profession of faith which this Gospel demands"¹⁹. Here Bassler in a footnote refers to "the fearless confession of the man born blind", and perhaps in the implied contrast we may catch something of what the Johannine presentation of Nicodemus may be about. Perhaps Nicodemus needs to move closer to that blind man's "fearless confession". Another signal picked up by Bassler is found in the "ambiguous context" established for Nicodemus' words by the fact that an important motif within this Gospel is first mentioned earlier in this chapter as an explanation for the reluctance of people to speak openly of Jesus - "for fear of the Jews". Turning to the actual words of Jesus, Bassler suggests that although at first they might seem to embrace and repeat Jesus' own injunction, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (v. 24), the truth is that Jesus' words "refer to a correct judgment regarding his person" while Nicodemus

"refers merely to a concern for correct legal procedures" so that, although his words do "unveil the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who rebuke the crowd for their ignorance of the law (v. 49) yet fail to follow it themselves", those words do not necessarily "reveal the depth of Nicodemus' faith". However, Bassler goes on to admit, although the words themselves do not suggest faith, "the context does promote this interpretation" pointing out the irony of the fact that the sarcastic question, "Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?" is almost immediately followed by the spectacle of one who has been identified as both an authority and a Pharisee apparently speaking out in Jesus' defence, so that, in Bassler's words "once again the 'Jews' are mistaken one of their number *does* believe (on some level at least) in Jesus" and the signals are again confused as "a clearly superficial defense of Jesus is presented contextually as an indication of faith".²⁰ Bassler's study is valuable in pointing to these signals, stressing context as well as text; it would seem a fair assessment of the narrative so far to suggest that there is as yet, at the end of chapter seven, no final definitive answer to the question of Nicodemus. I find the word of Culpepper most interesting here, as he tries to assess Nicodemus at this point - and sees a point of similarity with Pilate (whose response to Jesus will be the subject of our next chapter): "This ruler of the Jews, like Pilate, is attracted to Jesus, reluctant to confess faith but desirous of protecting Jesus, and rebuffed by the Jewish leaders."²¹

Our character's final appearance in the Gospel comes in chapter nineteen when he accompanies Joseph of Arimathea in carrying out the traditional burial rites

for Jesus. This pericope (19. 38-42), at the end of chapter nineteen, describes how Joseph "who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews" asked Pilate for permission to remove the body of Jesus. When that permission was granted, John tells how Nicodemus "who had at first come to him by night" brought a hundred pounds of spices, myrrh and aloes. They took the body of Jesus, wrapping it as was customary and laid it in a new garden tomb close at hand, since it was the Jewish day of Preparation.

What are we to make of these verses, in which Nicodemus says nothing, and in which his major contribution is to act with Joseph of Arimathea and, in particular, to provide what many see as an enormous amount of spices for the burial? Is there any significance in the "hundred pounds' weight of myrrh and aloes" - a burial in "the most sumptuous manner"²², as Barrett describes it? Is this huge quantity "obviously an exaggeration"²³, or are we in the realm of symbolism - a royal burial for a king, a suggestion proposed by Raymond Brown²⁴? In particular, for the purpose of our study, what are we to make of the fact that **Nicodemus** is part of this burial party? Are we to see Nicodemus as **here** moving closer to an open declaration of faith? We note that he acts here with Joseph of Arimathea, who is a disciple - but a secret disciple "**for fear of the Jews**". One might wonder whether we ought to see this as a negative factor, and yet Joseph has acted openly enough now to approach Pilate and ask for the body - and Nicodemus has joined him and acquired the spices, so that they cannot now be seen as doing everything in secret. Are they then to be seen as secret believers who are "secret" no longer? So Hoskyns saw

them as "two timorous believers" who are "publicly and courageously drawn to the Christ after His exaltation upon the Cross (xii. 32)."²⁵ Raymond Brown, who speaks of this Gospel as having, perhaps, a twofold audience - those who were already fully Christian believers, and those still in the Synagogue who believed but did not have the courage to profess it and risk excommunication - suggests that John may be hinting "that crypto-believers of his own time should follow the example of Joseph and Nicodemus"²⁶. This suggests a very positive interpretation of their roles here - in fact Brown later in the same section speaks of them as "men who partially accepted Jesus during his ministry but have been brought by his death to show their love for him".²⁷ Perhaps John only reminded us that Nicodemus was the one who at first came to Jesus by night in order to contrast that first "coming" with a more open "coming" now. William Temple suggests that Joseph "plucked up his courage" and approached Pilate, and that his courage "gave courage to another similarly placed" so that the last rites were "rendered by two men who had never dared to avow themselves disciples."²⁸ Were they doing that now? Is Lindars right when he declares that "these secret disciples now come out into the open"?²⁹

Others have read this scene differently. William Countryman maintains that Joseph and Nicodemus are, in a sense, "the wrong people at work" here, that Mary of Bethany had already been appointed to supply the aromatics for Jesus' burial - and that, moreover, "there is something wrong about both men". He goes on "Joseph is only a secret disciple; Nicodemus originally came to Jesus at night - a sign of his lack of enlightenment. They belong to that group

of powerful people who believed in Jesus but would not admit it because they loved human glory more than the glory that God gives (12. 42f). Their belief is defective; and they wrap Jesus' body up tightly in the cloth bands, much as Lazarus was wrapped (11. 44), for they certainly expect no sudden reversal of his present state. They are disciples - and also reminders of how inadequate disciples can be".³⁰ There is much here that is true, but it does seem a rather harsh judgment on these two - for we do not know for sure whether **any** of the disciples, even those whose faith might have been considered more adequate, expected any "sudden reversal" of Jesus' "present state", and they were certainly not the only "disciples" - in the Gospel record, or in the history of the Church in any age - who did things which remind us how "inadequate" disciples can be.

Is Nicodemus too late in "coming" to Jesus now? One might wonder whether he has come now because it is "safe" now that Jesus is dead? There is something of this thought in the approach of Lesslie Newbigin to this scene when he speaks of two secret believers from among the establishment coming forward "to honor in death the man they had not been brave enough to acknowledge openly when he was alive", adding a little later in the paragraph that "it is dangerous to follow a living prophet, but safe and pious to honor a dead one".³¹ As far as Newbigin is concerned, the actions of Joseph and Nicodemus belong to "the world which is passing away", since "a new creation will come forth from the tomb".

Is Nicodemus too late? Are these actions at the tomb futile? How are we to interpret these verses at the end of chapter nineteen? It is possible to read here the actions of one who has "come" too late, who was not prepared to acknowledge Jesus in life, perhaps because of the risks involved or perhaps because he was not convinced that Jesus was anything more than another prophet, and who now comes to make some sort of gesture to a "good man" who has been treated unjustly, and who might have been something more, although the evidence has not yet been sufficiently convincing. Nicodemus would then be seen here as a pious Jew - and a fair-minded man - in the company of another of like mind - doing his best to provide a dignified funeral and a peaceful resting place for the body of Jesus. It would also be possible to take the line pursued by Temple and Lindars - and others - and see here some evidence that Nicodemus has taken another step towards some acknowledgement of Jesus as more than simply another prophet. Several, like Temple and Lindars, are prepared to go further and see Nicodemus here making a step of faith like Donald English, in a little book which many years ago fired my interest in Nicodemus, who maintains that here in chapter nineteen Nicodemus "declares himself publicly by preparing Jesus' body for burial".³² It is, in fact, fascinating how very differently Nicodemus is viewed, as much in his last appearance as in his first ... so that while some see here a man coming nearer to faith, others can say "Nicodemus had come to Jesus by night and he is still in the dark, as we can see by the quantity of spices that he brings. They follow the burial customs of the Jews, but the reader knows that

in this case the procedure is unnecessary, partly because Jesus has already been anointed for burial at Bethany, but also because he will rise on the third day."³³

Bassler, whose treatment of the "mixed signals" has been of great interest, entitles the study of this pericope "an ambiguous funeral". As far as Bassler is concerned, the reader is encouraged by Nicodemus' "essentially gratuitous presence" - since a servant could have carried the spices for Joseph - to view the scene as, among other things, "an opportunity to bring closure to this ambiguous figure" and yet here again the text proves indeterminate and ambiguous. Nicodemus is here seen with Joseph, who is known to be a secret disciple "for fear of the Jews" - and the Gospel's author has made clear his opinion of those who conceal their faith out of fear: "Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they be put out of the synagogue, for they valued their reputation more than the honor that comes from God" (12. 42-43). So, Bassler suggests, to prefer human reputation to divine recognition is "a serious charge that seems incompatible with true faith", so that to define Joseph "and by association Nicodemus" as secret disciples who act - or do not act - out of fear of the Jews, "would seem to define them in terms of totally inadequate faith"³⁴. And yet, Bassler goes on, some have argued that "to ask publicly for the body of Jesus (19. 38) indicates that the enervating fear has been overcome, amounts, in fact, to a public confession of faith", adding the question that if "fear of the Jews" compromises the faith of Joseph and Nicodemus, "how are they to be distinguished from the rest of the disciples, who, after the

crucifixion, hid behind closed doors 'for fear of the Jews' (20. 19)?"³⁵ Bassler also points to signals related to Nicodemus alone, like the reminder in v. 39 that he "had at first come to him by night", wondering whether this is to be seen as a "condemning preference for darkness that has been his from the first" or whether we are to see here " a *contrast* between Nicodemus's initially (το πρωτον) secretive, nocturnal behavior and his current bold actions." Then there is the question of whether these "current actions" - the bringing of the vast amount of spices - are "a sign of love and honor" or rather a sign of " the limits of Nicodemus's vision, an inability to see beyond the grave" although again there is the reminder that Peter, and even the "beloved disciple", did not "understand the significance of the resurrection from the dead until Jesus appeared to them (20. 9)."³⁶ It seems that any reader hoping to find here, in these verses from chapter nineteen, some "closure" to this "ambiguous figure" may well feel disappointed that the ambiguity is for many not yet resolved.

What, then, can we say about Nicodemus, his role in this Gospel - and, in particular, his response to Jesus? Is it possible to come to any sort of conclusions about this rather enigmatic character - a character who makes only three brief appearances in the narrative, and yet whose "story", as we mentioned at the outset, would seem to have links with so many of the themes and ideas which are central to this Gospel of John the "misunderstanding" motif, the role of "the Jews", the central issue of how individuals come to faith and how they gain entrance into the "eternal life" of which this Gospel speaks - how they come to "see" and "believe" that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

How far, we might want to ask, did **Nicodemus** come to "see" who Jesus is and how far was he willing and / or able to respond to Jesus in faith? Was he, by the end of the Gospel record, a secret believer "now come out into the open", as Lindars would have us believe,³⁷ or was he still "a representative of the old order which is being superseded", albeit "a peculiarly favourable and friendly representative"³⁸, as Dodd describes him? There is also the question, touched upon earlier, of how far any character in this Gospel is "able" to respond to Jesus in faith - whether a character like Nicodemus is really free to respond, or whether faith itself is a "gift", given to some and not to others. We noted earlier that Raymond Collins suggested that Nicodemus had not received the gift of faith. This whole question of how far an individual is in control of their own response to God in this Gospel of John, an ongoing issue for us in our study, has been discussed by others, too; Kummel, in his treatment of "the Johannine Message of Christ", suggests that "no one can believe of his own accord", that if a man comes to believe "it is God who has taken the first step" although "this does not mean that the man himself does not have to take the second step"³⁹. This may provide an interesting discussion when we place the response of the man born blind alongside those of Pilate and Nicodemus - for, as we have said, this is an issue to which we are returning again and again. We might also perhaps remind ourselves again here that the purpose of the writing of this Gospel of John is "**that you may believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (20. 31) The

question might be asked, then, whether Nicodemus is entirely responsible for his response to Jesus?

Many come to the conclusion that Nicodemus is some sort of representative of the individual whose faith is inadequate. There is much talk among commentators about what has come to be known as "signs faith", so that Wayne Meeks comes to conclude that "Nicodemus thus becomes the representative of those Jews mentioned in 2. 23f., who 'believed in [Jesus]' name because they saw the signs which he did', but to whom Jesus would not 'entrust himself' because of his suprahuman knowledge of their hearts."⁴⁰ The problem with this line of thought about Nicodemus is that so many of the disciples first came to faith as a result of seeing the "signs", the miraculous things which Jesus did. We find it thus from the very beginning; after the miracle at Cana, John records ... "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him." (2. 11) Was Nicodemus' reaction so very different? (Incidentally, there is also the very clear declaration that John wrote about the "signs" in order to help individuals come to faith (20. 30-31) - which tends to give a positive rather than a negative "press" to the notion of the "signs".) Similarly, earlier in this chapter we met Bassler's argument that Nicodemus' initial confession of faith, while it might not have been as profound as Andrew's or Nathanael's, was at least as substantive as Philip's. Was he so far behind? Perhaps Nicodemus' faith is inadequate because he lacked the courage to confess it openly - Meeks sees this difference between him and the man born blind, as we noted earlier. Perhaps his fault is

lack of courage, his "fear of the Jews" - and yet we have also noted that others, who **were** counted as disciples, were later to hide "for fear of the Jews". Still there seems to be this suggestion that Nicodemus went so far - but not far enough; to this we will return before we conclude.

Perhaps, as we are seeking to "sum up" the arguments with regard to this character of Nicodemus, we need to keep in mind two other ways of viewing his significance in this Gospel. The first is suggested by those who adopt a literary approach to this Gospel of John. They will very often want to see Nicodemus as some sort of symbolic figure. We have met already the notion of Nicodemus as one of the characters who act as "foils", enabling Jesus to have a satisfactory starting point for his discourses. Another interesting argument comes from Francis Moloney in a study of John 2. 1 - 4. 54, "from Cana to Cana", in which he argues that John presents in this section of the Gospel a series of encounters with Jesus in which individuals react in different ways, some showing no faith, some with partial faith and some with full, complete faith - the measure of true faith for John being "a radical openness to the word of Jesus, i.e. to all that he has come to reveal". Nicodemus, Moloney claims, is one who is used by John as an example of a man with "an incomplete faith", one who seeks out Jesus and is prepared to make a limited confession of faith, who "within the limits of his Judaism" is prepared to accept Jesus, "as long as Jesus fits into his categories" an example, in Moloney's argument, of "partial faith".⁴¹

The second way of viewing Nicodemus which might be worth keeping in mind is seen most clearly in the work of those who look to the life situation of the Johannine church for some help in understanding this Gospel of John, and who would suggest that we might find in that suggested historical situation the sort of context in which such "symbolic" figures as Nicodemus might perhaps be more clearly understood. For example, Raymond Collins would want to suggest that within the life-situation of the Johannine church "we ought to envisage a series of homilies directed to enkindling faith in Jesus", and that in the development of these homilies "various persons were chosen from the common Gospel tradition or selected from his own tradition by the homilist to illustrate some point about the nature of faith, or lack of it, in Jesus Christ"⁴². Nicodemus is, for him, a "type of unbelief"⁴³ - one who has not received the gift of belief. Others who look to the historical situation of John's church are not so hard on Nicodemus; we have already met the suggestion that he and Joseph might be seen as examples to those in the synagogue who are afraid to confess faith - examples, that is, of those who have "come out" of hiding - examples to be followed. Others would see him as simply a representative of the "crypto-Christians", the secret believers; so Martyn saw it as "obvious" that, for John, Nicodemus was "typical of those in the Gerousia who secretly believe"⁴⁴. Even among those who look to the historical situation, then, there is no real agreement about where this character stands in terms of a faith response to Jesus.

How positive a picture is it possible to paint of Nicodemus? Some would like us to see in Nicodemus a Jewish leader, a Pharisee, who first "came" to Jesus to talk and ask questions, then grew in faith, perhaps slowly - but sufficiently to want to defend Jesus against unfair treatment, and who by the end of this Gospel was prepared to be publicly associated with Joseph of Arimathea in the burial rites. Perhaps this is the picture that many of us want to carry from the Gospel - and yet those "mixed signals" noticed by most who study this Gospel and its characters disturb us and prevent us from being entirely positive about this "man of the Pharisees".

If it is true that one of the central themes of this Gospel is how - and how far - individuals come to "see" and "believe", we may have to admit finally that in the case of Nicodemus we just simply do not know how far he made progress towards the sort of faith which this Gospel of John sought to encourage and develop. Perhaps we will have to accept Bassler's view that with Nicodemus the data "refuse to fall neatly into place", that he is different from the "Jews", but distinct from the disciples - Bassler's *tertium quid*.⁴⁵ It is Bassler who suggests that what we need is a "final definitive encounter with Jesus" - which we do not have, leaving us with "no final word" and an "unsettling conclusion" which Bassler feels has been "largely ignored" by interpreters of the Gospel: Bassler moves for an answer of sorts into the realm of reader response criticism, which leads the reader to value the very ambiguity which some would find so frustrating - a line which we will not pursue here. Perhaps we must simply learn to live with that disturbing ambiguity, with the picture of a

character evidently affected by his encounter with Jesus - but not in the end clearly defined as a disciple in the sense **in which this Gospel would seem to define discipleship**. So Culpepper sees Nicodemus as being not far from the kingdom of God but remaining outside⁴⁶, and Bassler - noting that to be less than fully committed to the Johannine Jesus is to retain the damning and dangerous connection with the world, and that the true disciples are, like Jesus not "of the world" - finally decides that Nicodemus "moves through the narrative with one foot in each world, and in this Gospel that is just not good enough"⁴⁷.

Having spent some time exploring the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus - and the nature of Nicodemus' response to Jesus - we move on now, in our next chapter, to the other character to be considered alongside the man born blind from chapter 9; we look next at John's presentation of Pilate and his encounter with Jesus as it is recorded in John 18 - 19.

- 1 Temple, *Readings* p. 44
- 2 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p.133
- 3 Brown, *John* p. 130
- 4 Meeks, "The Man from Heaven" p.54
- 5 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 643
- 6 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" pp. 637 - 638
- 7 Meeks, "The Man from Heaven" pp. 54 - 55
- 8 Stibbe, *John* p. 55
- 9 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 135
- 10 Collins, "Representative Figures" p. 37
- 11 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 205
- 12 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 638
- 13 Collins, "Jesus' Conversation" p.1419
- 14 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 310
- 15 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 304
- 16 Barrett, *The Gospel of John* p. 332
- 17 Brown, *John* p. 330
- 18 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 639
- 19 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 639
- 20 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 640
- 21 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 136
- 22 Barrett, *The Gospel of John* p. 554
- 23 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 592
- 24 Brown, *John* p. 960
- 25 Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* p. 536
- 26 Brown, *John* pp. 959-960
- 27 Brown, *John* p. 960
- 28 Temple, *Readings* p. 371-2
- 29 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 592
- 30 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 132
- 31 Newbiggin, *The Light has Come* p. 260
- 32 English, *The Meaning of the Warmed Heart* p. 20
- 33 Fenton, *Finding the Way* p.129
- 34 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 641
- 35 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 642
- 36 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" pp. 642-643
- 37 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* 592
- 38 Dodd, *The Fourth Gospel* p. 303
- 39 Kummel, *The Theology of the New Testament* p. 301
- 40 Meeks, "The Man from Heaven" p. 55
- 41 Moloney, "From Cana to Cana" pp. 831-832
- 42 Collins, "Representative Figures" p. 27
- 43 Collins, "Representative Figures" p. 31
- 44 Martyn, *History and Theology* p. 87
- 45 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 643
- 46 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 136
- 47 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 646

Chapter 4. "Seeing and Believing" - PILATE - An attempt to examine Pilate's response to Jesus - with particular reference to JOHN 18. 28 - 19. 16 (a)

In this chapter we move on in our study to examine in greater detail the second of the characters whose response to Jesus we wish to consider alongside that of the man born blind in chapter 9, as we explore the nature of the interesting character who plays a considerable part in the narrative of chapters 18 and 19 in this Gospel. The Johannine presentation and treatment of the character of Pilate and his encounter with Jesus is certainly worthy of investigation and opens up some of the important questions about how individuals and groups in this Gospel react when faced with the dilemma of deciding who Jesus is and how they ought to respond to him. It may be of interest to note that here, as in chapter 9, "the Jews" play an active part in the action; in fact, many commentators have noted that there are actually three personae here in these scenes - Jesus, Pilate and the Jews as, for example, Gilbin who sees all three as involved in what he calls the "confrontational interaction" of this passage.¹ It is a passage which many have praised for its illustration of John's narrative skills, but it is also a passage which is dominated, as Lindars maintains, by the emotional effect of a "devastating dramatic irony, in which the Jews finally acknowledge Caesar to be their king, in order to be rid of Jesus, their true king".² This powerful irony, and the manner in which John shows us these characters engaged in conversation and conflict, and in the course of it all raises the very real and relevant issues of kingship and authority,

power and allegiance, make the scene in which Pilate and Jesus meet worthy of detailed study. John shows us Pilate coming face to face with "the Word made flesh", and allows us to witness how he, John, sees Pilate responding.

This is, of course, the "Johannine" Pilate, and we need to recognize from the start that John's Pilate may well be different from the "Pilate of history" - if it is possible to speak of a "Pilate of history" at all, given that there is a certain lack of agreement about how we ought to view this Roman official of equestrian rank who ruled Judea from A.D. 26 to 36. Raymond Brown considers this lack of real agreement in some detail³, pointing to what can be known about the character of Pilate from Jewish writings, much of it not very favourable - like the picture from Philo (*Ad Gaium* 38; # 302), which attributes to Pilate robbery, murder and inhumanity ... but then remind us that Philo's account has been questioned by P. L. Maier (*Harvard Theological Review* 62 [1969], 109-21), who suggests that the more sympathetic New Testament portrayal may be truer than hitherto suspected. Whatever we make of the lack of agreement about the "Pilate of history" figure, we realize that John, in this Gospel, chooses to present to us a Pilate who is "patient, willing to listen and no match for the Jews."⁴ We are tempted to ask whether John wanted to make Pilate seem at least a little aware of the special quality of this particular prisoner; Beasley-Murray quotes an interesting comment from Hoskyns on Jesus' reply to Pilate's question as to whether Jesus is the king of the Jews - Jesus asks, Hoskyns says, whether Pilate's question proceeds from "a spontaneous recognition that he is in the presence of royalty" or whether he is

simply echoing the Jewish accusations.⁵ All of this makes the encounter between Pilate and Jesus fascinating; one wonders how far this representative of the Roman state, as John presents him, might be able to recognize - or even catch a glimpse of - the real identity of Jesus. Throughout our study of this encounter we will find ourselves coming back again and again to John's interpretation of this meeting between the Roman governor and the Son of God.

Pilate is first mentioned by name in this Gospel in 18. 29, when John tells us that he came out of the praetorium to speak to those who had brought Jesus to him; he came out because they would not enter his residence lest they should be contaminated by contact with a Gentile dwelling and therefore unable to eat their Passover supper. Much has been made by commentators of this reluctance on their part, and the irony of it all that "in their zeal to eat the passover lamb they unwittingly help to fulfil its significance through their demanding the death of the Lamb of God, at the same time shutting themselves out from its saving efficacy."⁶ Lightfoot's comment here on what he sees as St. John's view of the Jews is interesting - "that having ranged themselves under the 'ruler of the world', they are about to allow no moral scruples to prevent them from achieving their purpose", so that, he says, "the justice of the Lord's words in Mt. 23. 24 becomes evident, that in straining out the gnat they swallow the camel."⁷ When Pilate asks what accusation they are bringing against Jesus, they at first simply declare that they would not have brought him if he were not a criminal, as if they are reluctant to bring a specific charge. However, when

Pilate then tells them to deal with the judgment themselves, they reply that they are not allowed to put anyone to death. From the outset, then, Pilate is not presented as being particularly eager to get involved in their accusations against Jesus, although it becomes increasingly clear that he will not be able to avoid the issue or the question of judgment. There seems to be an inevitability about the way in which Jesus and Pilate are thrown together, as John tells the story; Jesus is, apparently, the one who is "brought" to the meeting as a prisoner - and yet it is, in a strange way, Pilate - and not Jesus - who is unable to escape from the encounter which it brings. This is an impression which is sustained throughout the episode - and to which we shall return.

We might just note, in passing, one detail from the first verse in the passage here (18. 28) - that it is early, dawn, the beginning of a new day when this action begins. Brodie, considering this fact in the context of John's emphasis on light and darkness - and in the context of "It was night" (13. 30) and "It was cold" (18. 18) - looks to the possible theological significance of the moment when Jesus enters the Roman praetorium as "evocative of a new relationship with the world" ... but reminds us that the Jews are so "preoccupied with obscure ritualistic law" that they "remain outside" this "new dawn for the world".⁸ Bultmann suggests that "the day of the victory of Jesus over the world is breaking."⁹

We have already mentioned the fact that John, in 5. 29, says that Pilate "came out" to the Jews who had brought Jesus; their reluctance to enter the

praetorium contributes to the situation in which Pilate is reported to be very much "on the move" in these scenes. He goes outside to talk with the Jews and then moves back inside to speak with Jesus. Brown points to the fact that "the picture of movement in and out of the building throughout the trial is Johannine"; it may well be that the evangelist sees, and wishes to reflect, in this movement to and fro, some indication of Pilate's state of mind, as he wrestles with the issues before him - the dilemma of Jesus' identity and his own response to the situation in which he finds himself. Brown is quite clear on the matter: "Pilate's constant passing from one setting to the other gives external expression to the struggle taking place within his soul, for his certainty of Jesus' innocence increases at the same rate as does the political pressure forcing him to condemn Jesus."¹⁰ The Roman prefect, then, who ought to be in control of the proceedings, is seen almost like a modern-day negotiator in a "peace-talks" situation, moving between the parties and caught up in the whole matter far more than he perhaps intended: under pressure from one party to comply with their wishes and finding the other party reluctant to do very much to save himself. Pilate's situation here is not the most comfortable or easy. In terms of Johannine theology, this may not be so very surprising; again we see that there is no real doubt who is in control during this "trial", and it certainly is not the representative of Roman authority!

It is surely that same Johannine theology - and that same question about who is in control of affairs - which is behind what we see in Pilate's first exchange with those who had brought Jesus to him. As he asks them about their accusation

against Jesus (18. 30) and suggests that they should try him themselves (v. 31), and as they reply that it is not lawful for them to put any man to death (v. 31), John comments (v. 32) ... "This was to fulfil the word which Jesus had spoken to show by what death he was to die". As Brown suggests in "The Death of the Messiah", John's major concern here is not "which law forbids putting to death" - as technical disputes among interpreters might suggest - but rather "the fulfillment of Jesus' words about death", because, he says, "both Jewish accusers and Roman judge are actors in a drama scripted by a divine planner." He reminds us of Jesus' words in 12. 31-32 ... "and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself ..." and the evangelist's comment which follows those words, that Jesus said this ... "to show by what death he was to die" (12. 33). Brown goes on to point out "that Jesus is not going to die a death like stoning, the usual punishment for blasphemy, that would cast him down to the earth, but a death that would elevate him. The Romans may present his crucifixion as the punishment of a reputed king who would rebel against Caesar, but believers will recognize it as the triumphant lifting up of Jesus in return to the Father." He concludes ... "Ironically, 'the Jews' want to force the Roman to contribute to the glorification of Jesus".¹¹

When Pilate first goes "back" into the praetorium, it is to question Jesus about the issue of kingship: "Are you the King of the Jews ?" Jesus does not give a direct answer to the question, but he does go on to speak to Pilate about his "kingdom" - a kingdom which is not "of this world", a kingdom which does not draw its source or its authority from this world, which, he maintains, explains

why his "subjects" are not fighting in the worldly sense to defend him from being delivered to the Jews. It is within this chapter that Brown would maintain that John gives us "a splendid exposition of Jesus' kingship"¹²; it is certainly true that as readers we find ourselves confronted by the whole question of what it means to be a king, not only from the perspective of those involved in this scene of the drama - Pilate, Jesus, the Jews, as John presents them, but also from the Johannine perspective as a whole, as John would seem to be engaged in some reformulation, some redefinition of the traditional understanding of what kingship might mean. It may be worthwhile to pause briefly in order to examine some of the issues raised.

One must suppose that for Pilate a king, like his own Emperor, is one who wields earthly power and authority and is in a position to demand allegiance and loyalty from his people; if we were to include here an illustration from another Gospel, we might look to Jesus' own words, recorded by Mark, about the "rulers of the Gentiles" who "lord it over them" and "exercise authority over them" (Mark 10. 42). A "king of the Jews", then, would be, for Pilate, a national ruler, since "Pilate naturally could only interpret it in political terms, as was intended by the Jewish authorities"¹³ - and any such national ruler of the Jews would pose a political threat to the regime Pilate was in place to maintain. The Jewish authorities might have intended - or at least hoped - that Pilate would interpret the "kingship" issue in this way, but their own view of the kingship issue was rather different. For the Jewish nation, the word "king" had always aroused complex reactions; at times in their history Israel had wanted a

king, asked God to choose and appoint a king over them - but deep down in their consciousness there was the sense that the kingship of Israel belonged to God alone. We find evidence of it in their Scriptures: "Hearken to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to thee do I pray" (Psalm 5. 2), "The Lord is king for ever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land" (Psalm 10. 16), "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King" (Isaiah 43. 15). In this encounter with Pilate the Jews find themselves having to decide where their allegiance lies - especially when the moment comes when Pilate brings Jesus before them and asks: "Shall I crucify your king?" (19. 15) It does seem that in declaring allegiance to Tiberius Caesar ("We have no king but Caesar!"), they are prepared to forfeit their special relationship with God, their "favoured nation" status, as they deny God's primary claim on their allegiance and loyalty. Pilate pushes them to this position after they have pushed him into a corner with their threat of his becoming known as one who is no friend of Caesar.

In the midst of all of this Jesus - the one accused of being "the king of the Jews"- speaks in his own terms about his "kingship", and challenges the understanding of others. When Pilate asks him whether he is the king of the Jews, we have seen that Jesus simply asks another question about where Pilate's question has come from! When Pilate asks him what he has done to make the Jews hand him over, Jesus speaks of his "kingship" in a way which cannot have been easy for Pilate to comprehend, for he speaks of a kingship which does not have its origin in this world, in the *κοσμος*. It is as if, as Barrett suggests, "Jesus admits that he is a king, but proceeds at once with

such a definition of his kingship as removes it from the sphere of sedition and robbery."¹⁴ His is a kingship which is not "of this world", Jesus says, which is why his servants do not fight to keep him from being handed over to the Jews. The implication is surely that those who do not understand the nature of his kingship (and which of the characters involved here does?) will not understand his actions or his attitude to what is happening to him. Lindars makes an interesting comment here when he considers the expression "not of this world" (v. 36) in terms of what he calls "spheres of relationships" ... "Jesus' kingdom is not a kingdom of the world of men apart from God, but a kingdom of men in relation to God; not secular, but spiritual. For a kingdom understood in this way military action is not appropriate - a fact which the Church has not always remembered."¹⁵ We might recall here the clear distinction which Jesus made during those exchanges with "the Jews" in chapter 8 : "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (8. 23)

It is here, perhaps, that we must speak of what we might begin to see as the "Johannine" interpretation of the kingdom and the kingship of Jesus, if as Pryor suggests, we are to believe that this "kingship motif" dominates this segment of the Gospel; he would suggest - and perhaps he is right - that "kingship" is in fact introduced early in this Gospel when it is affirmed in the first chapter by Nathaniel (1. 49), that it is highlighted in the account of the triumphal entry when "the Johannine Jesus mounts the ass to reorder the popular acclamation of kingship" (12. 12-26), and that the theme reaches its climax here in the scenes we are considering, as John "unveils his understanding of it"¹⁶ So many

things in this Gospel of John begin to fit into place as we begin to understand what John might be saying about his understanding of Jesus' kingship - the refusal of Jesus to allow them to make him king by force (6. 15), the image of the good shepherd (10. 11) who will lay down his life for his sheep (recalling, Pryor would suggest, the traditional Jewish terminology of the king as shepherd of the flock of God¹⁷), whose sheep know his voice and follow and receive eternal life, the Lord and Master who washes feet in order to demonstrate how his people ought to live (13. 14). This is a different sort of kingship and a different sort of kingdom from that which Pilate, at least, would have had in mind - and a king whose kingship is not of his own making at all, but is from the Father who sent him. This is a kingdom whose king is not pre-occupied with power and self-interest and whose subjects are called to be much more concerned with recognizing the identity of the king, the Messiah, and coming to know him as the source of the truth, the way to God and the entry into that Eternal Life of which this Gospel speaks - rather than any thought of offensive action to protect their "king" or any exercise of political power. Sanders suggests that Jesus is here putting into words for Pilate's benefit "the dilemma in which he has been throughout his ministry - though conscious of an absolute authority, and of Davidic descent, he has known that to assert his authority by force would ruin the purpose for which he had come."¹⁸

So Jesus, giving expression to this Johannine understanding and redefinition of this whole concept of kingship, says to Pilate: "For this I was born, and for this

I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." (18. 37) "With this saying", Bultmann suggests, "a peculiar turn takes place: the question about the *law* becomes a question about *faith*. For without doubt Pilate himself is put on the spot through this statement; he is asked whether he is willing to listen to the voice of the Revealer, and he must show whether he is 'of the truth'".¹⁹ Beasley-Murray likewise maintains that Jesus' positive statement to Pilate about the kingdom of truth "does more than describe the subjects of his kingdom; it implicitly conveys an invitation to join their number", so that Pilate is placed "in a situation of decision as to the truth that gives men a part in the kingdom of salvation".²⁰ Perhaps something of the same notion is present in the suggestion from Gilbin that "without pleading for freedom, Jesus repeatedly offers Pilate an opportunity to understand him."²¹

Pilate's response is to ask, "What is truth?" and we are left, perhaps, wondering what to make of his words. For Beasley-Murray, and for others, it is clear that Pilate is not accepting the invitation to join the kingdom - and he quotes Haenchen's observation: "If Pilate, face to face with this Truth standing before him asks, 'What is truth?' it is evident that he does not belong to 'those whom the Father has given to Jesus'".²² Lindars suggests that in dissociating himself from the challenge implicit in Jesus' words Pilate "has already lost his integrity, and his subsequent behaviour in sentencing an innocent man to death is explained"²³, although it might be possible to think of Pilate here as still greatly torn - as Countryman sees him, with no case against Jesus, "hovering between

Jesus and the cosmos" and "unwilling to execute him for nothing".²⁴ Pilate's "What is truth?" would then be an honest, perhaps rather wistful, question from one who is baffled and confused - but also perhaps aware that he is in the presence of someone who appears so much in command of things, even though he is a prisoner, albeit probably innocent of the charges brought, and with a very real possibility of facing the death penalty. What are we to make of Pilate here? Westcott finds "nothing of real reverence or seriousness in his words, still less of awe", and suggests that Pilate "does not shape, even in passing thought, a subject for earnest enquiry, but half sadly, half cynically, implies that even in ordinary matters truth is unattainable."²⁵ J. N. Sanders, however, suggests that Pilate has a "certain sympathy" with Jesus, sees that they are both victims of a plot, and "wants to free both Jesus and himself if he can do so without danger in the explosive period of the Passover."²⁶ As we noted earlier, in chapter 1, Barrett sees Pilate here as "not unfriendly" to Jesus, because he does not wish to put him to death and sees that he is the victim of a Jewish plot. "Yet," Barrett goes on, "sympathy is, in John's mind, a quite inadequate attitude to Jesus: like Nicodemus (7. 50f), Pilate for all his fair play and open-mindedness is not of the truth; he is of the world. This is John's point ..."²⁷ Barrett's comparison of Pilate with Nicodemus may prove an interesting consideration as we place these two characters alongside the blind man from chapter 9 and ask questions about the way in which individuals are shown responding to Jesus in this Gospel. If Pilate is at all sympathetic towards Jesus, if he begins to see even a glimpse of the true nature of the one before him, then we might well be asking again those questions about the validity of even such a tentative

response, even if many would see it as quite inadequate - particularly from the viewpoint of the writer of this Gospel.

A very different interpretation of Pilate at this point in the narrative is presented by Rensberger in a study of this trial. In an attempt to read the Johannine Pilate as a strong character rather than a weak one, one who is "undeniably hostile to 'the Jews' but not, by that token, at all friendly to Jesus "for whose innocence he is not really concerned", he considers Pilate's aim as being to humiliate 'the Jews' and "to ridicule their national hopes by means of Jesus".²⁸ Rensberger here sees Pilate's question "What is truth?" not as "the question of a serious seeker" ... for if it were, he maintains, "he would stay for an answer". He goes on "Those who are of the truth - rather than of this world - listen to Jesus (18. 37); the Roman is not interested".²⁹ Pilate, according to this reading, is indifferent to Jesus' innocence, since he is simply using Jesus "to make a ridiculous example of Jewish nationalism".³⁰ This is an interesting reading of the Roman official - and his attitude to Jesus - to set alongside those already mentioned, although it is not one which readily appeals to or convinces the present writer, who does not see Pilate as such a very strong character - or as one who is so wholly unconcerned about Jesus' fate.

Pilate then goes out again to the Jews and announces that he can find no case against Jesus, that in his view, then, he is an innocent man. "From this point on", according to Culpepper, "the issue is not Jesus' guilt or innocence but whether Pilate will defend Jesus against the Jews"³¹, and this may be an

interesting way of viewing Pilate's dilemma, or maybe Brown is right when he declares that the subject of the trial is no longer whether Jesus is innocent or guilty, but rather "whether or not Pilate will respond to the truth"³². Brown then sees Pilate turning away from the truth and later speaks of "the futility of Pilate's attempt to avoid a decision between the truth and the world", and the situation into which this leads him "Weakened by his inability to decide, Pilate is reduced from a position where he could have commanded the freeing of Jesus to a position where he must bargain for it."³³

Pilate then suggests to the Jews that Jesus, the "King of the Jews", should be released, in accordance with their Passover "custom", an initiative which Schnackenburg sees as "the most noticeable peculiarity of John's account"³⁴, but they will have none of it; it is clear that it is not going to be easy for Pilate to find a solution to his dilemma in that way, for they demand another to be released - Barabbas a robber. "Thus", says Brodie, "when faced with two diametrically opposed characters, the witness of saving truth and the thief their choice is for the one who is destructive".³⁵ Pilate then has Jesus whipped, perhaps, as Barclay suggests, in an attempt to "satisfy, or at least blunt the edge of, Jewish hostility"³⁶ and presumably he is aware of what happens next, when the soldiers put a plaited crown of thorns on Jesus' head and deck him in a purple robe, making a "royal" mockery of the one who has just a little earlier spoken with Pilate about the nature and the sphere of his kingship. Brown here speaks of the irony to be found in this mockery at the hands of the Roman soldiers - a type of irony "where the protagonists speak the truth unbeknown to

themselves."³⁷ One may wonder - with Barclay - whether Pilate is hoping by this physical abuse and mocking torment of the prisoner to be able to allow Jesus to escape the blood-lust of those who are "outside" of the praetorium, but if this is the case he is unsuccessful in his attempts to protect him.

Pilate then goes back "outside" (for he is still 'on the move'), declaring that he is going to bring Jesus out to them to show them that he still can find no case against him; he then brings Jesus out, still decked in the "regal" crown and cloak, presenting him to the Jews with the words, "Behold the man!" In bringing Jesus out in this way, as a man badly beaten and grotesquely mocked, Bultmann's "caricature of a king"³⁸, Grayston suggests that it is as if Pilate is saying to them, 'If you want a messianic king, this is what you can have', and that "in the famous words *Here is the man (ecce homo)* Pilate is saying 'He is a man, not a king. As you can see, there is no evidence of sovereignty or divinity about him'.³⁹ For those who have come to "see" and "believe", whether in John's day or in any generation since that day, there is a deep and powerful irony in Pilate's words, "Here is the man!"; for them Jesus is, indeed, "the man" ... but he is also so much more - for he is the "Word made flesh", God "incarnate", and therefore for them, to their eyes of faith, he displays every evidence of sovereignty and divinity. If Pilate had hoped by this means to save Jesus from his accusers, he is again unsuccessful because at the sight of their victim the chief priests and the officers shout for his crucifixion. Pilate, declaring for the third time that he finds no case against Jesus - and what is said three times is an unbreakable decision, adds Grayston⁴⁰ - then tells them to

carry out the crucifixion themselves; it seems likely, as some have suggested, that this is a reflection of the exasperation which Pilate is feeling at their opposition to his attempts to save Jesus - since both Pilate and the Jews know that they are not in a position to execute him themselves. They cannot act in this case without Pilate's authority, and they are determined to get their own way; it is increasingly clear that they will find a way to make him give way to their demands, and so they now introduce the demand that Jesus must die because he has claimed to be God's son. John tells us that when Pilate heard this "this kind of talk", as Brown puts it, he was more afraid than ever; this Roman prefect is not having an easy time with this particular Jewish problem. Fenton suggests that this first mention of fear not only marks "the change from the original charge (18. 30) to what the Jews have said in v. 7", but also prepares for the final scene (vv. 12-16) "in which the Jews will play on Pilate's fear".⁴¹ The thought behind this latest allegation certainly makes Pilate very apprehensive; from his point of view, as Lindars points out, "the idea was not so much blasphemy as a real and awesome possibility", since pagan mythology had plenty of examples of gods appearing as men,⁴² and Pilate has become aware of what Bultmann calls the "aura of the uncanny" that surround Jesus.⁴³ Pilate has become seriously afraid, Gilbin suggests, when confronted with this accusation of Jesus claiming divine sonship, for "this does not fit with his political cast of mind." He goes on to suggest that Pilate "could readily cope with ritual requirements or legal restrictions, but seems to be superstitious about matters regarding divinity."⁴⁴

Pilate's reaction to this latest twist in the story is to go "inside" again, and to engage Jesus once more in conversation. His questions to Jesus now are not about "kingship", but rather about origin and authority; we might perhaps think that Pilate is at last beginning to engage with what Jesus has been saying. Again the question of authority is before us. Jesus does not answer Pilate's question about his origin, "Where have you come from?", which Stibbe sees as the "key question about Jesus in the fourth gospel"⁴⁵ and which, as Fenton says, John would regard as a proper question. "We know that the answer is that Jesus is from God; but this cannot be said to Pilate because he does not deal in these ideas; so Jesus is silent."⁴⁶ It might be, of course, that Jesus does not say it to Pilate here because he has already told Pilate of his coming into the world (18. 37). However, when Pilate responds to that silence with his next question: "Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?" Jesus has an answer for his questioner, although whether Pilate would regard it as an answer is another matter - for Jesus declares that the only power Pilate has over him is that which has been given to him "from above", so that Pilate is not in fact as much to blame as the one who delivered him over to Pilate in the first place. How much Pilate understands of Jesus' words here one can only conjecture, for, as Brown puts it "Pilate is questioning on one level" and "Jesus is answering on another" - a technique, Brown says, "akin to 'misunderstanding' ", a concept which Brown finds also in the Nicodemus episode⁴⁷ indeed the motif of "misunderstanding" is a feature of the exchanges between Jesus and other characters in this Gospel (for example the Samaritan woman in chapter 4). More and more the contrast is being drawn -

the contrast which is so much a part of this Gospel - between what is "from above" and has its origin in God, and what is "from below", and owes its origin and its authority to the *κοσμος*. Men and women must choose where their allegiance lies. Those who seek the death of Jesus are, it would seem, "of the world". Pilate finds himself in the midst of all of this conflict. Jesus says that Pilate's power is given him "from above" - from the state, maybe, but also from God who has, as Brown puts it, "assigned him a role in 'the hour'". This word *ανωθεν*, which in this chapter 19 would seem to have the meaning "from above", and so, perhaps, "from heaven" - which might have led to some misunderstanding here - is, of course, the same word which earlier in the Gospel (3. 3,7), during the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, would seem to carry also its other meaning - "from the first", "from the beginning", and hence "anew" or "again" - which clearly contributed to the "misunderstanding" motif there. Brown goes on to comment further on this verse 11 in a way which helps to explain not just the nature of Pilate's power but also the claim of Jesus that Pilate's is not the greater sin - "Pilate has tried to use this power over Jesus to free him. He will not be successful because he has not totally committed himself to the truth and has sought in vain to be neutral; yet he did not instinctively hate the truth, so his sin is less than that of Caiaphas and 'the Jews' who want to kill Jesus."⁴⁸ Surely here Brown has presented a valuable interpretation of the issues involved in these verses, and of Pilate's role and actions. Are we to think that there is hope for Pilate yet - at least more hope than there is for those who actively set out to destroy Jesus?

At verse 12, it seems that we are moving into the final episode of this drama, as Pilate again seeks to release Jesus and the Jews use their political blackmail by "implicitly raising again the threat of denouncing him to Rome".⁴⁹ Again we notice that the kingship motif returns to the forefront of the argument - here in the words of the Jews "Everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar". It is clear that the Jews are holding in front of Pilate the possibility of his being seen as one who has taken the side of a potential rival to Caesar - a rival who "makes himself a king", for that is their claim. Barrett suggests that in allowing the theme of kingship to govern the decisive stages of the argument up to verse 16, John is probably true to history⁵⁰; Brown, while accepting the historical accuracy of the motivation given for Pilate's decision, sees the real interest here being theological, as John has turned the decision "into a drama of the Jewish rejection of the Davidic covenant".⁵¹ Pilate here is in a difficult position, and many commentators have sought to examine and explain Pilate's motives and decisions in this last part of this encounter with the Jews and with Jesus. Brown points to the fact that the prefect who had just boasted to Jesus that he had the power to release and the power to crucify is now deprived of a truly free use of that power - as the Jews force his hand by their blackmail and Pilate finds that "possible disgrace is too great a price to pay for defending the truth"⁵², or, as Bultmann put it, "fear of the world and fear of the mysterious come into conflict".⁵³ Pilate is not willing to "face the challenge of Jesus' claims" is how Lindars sees it; since he can only resist the argument of the Jews if he actually takes Jesus' part, Lindars describes him reluctantly going through the formality of giving sentence and putting off the

"fatal decision" until the last possible moment "when he is forced to condemn Jesus out of consideration for the implications of his own personal position."⁵⁴

We might pause to ask ourselves how far John wants us to see Pilate as reluctant to hand Jesus over, even at this stage in the action.

When Pilate heard these thinly veiled threats from the Jews, he brought Jesus outside and then took up his position on the judgment-seat. Beasley-Murray sees the trial by Pilate now drawing to its climax: "when the Jews see him ascending the tribunal they know they have won the day"⁵⁵, he says - and yet one might question how far this is to be any but a hollow victory, since Pilate soon shows that he has his own plans for revenge on those who have cornered him in this way. Much has been said about John's reference to the time of these events - the sixth hour on the Day of Preparation for the Passover - as Pilate declares to the Jews, "Behold your king" and, as Barrett puts it, "the clever argument of the Jews is thrust back upon them with bitter irony".⁵⁶ Many commentators share this view of the irony of the situation; Brown points to the ironical touch of the Johannine writer who has the Jews renounce the covenant at the moment when their priests are beginning the preparations for the feast that annually recalls God's deliverance of his people. "By the blood of the lamb He marked them off to be spared as His own, and now they know no king but the Roman Emperor."⁵⁷ This timing is surely significant, marking Jesus, as he is delivered over to his death, as the "true Pascal lamb"⁵⁸. In Pilate's words "Behold your king", many see Pilate mocking, not Jesus now, but the Jews; perhaps not all, however, would go as far as Lindars in his view of Pilate here,

for he sees in Pilate's words "almost a confession of faith, for he cannot bring himself to deny that Jesus is King in a sense which impresses and frightens him". As the Jews reject the one they ought to acknowledge as sent by God, Lindars suggests that Pilate is "well aware that what Jesus stands for comes close to their most cherished hopes."⁵⁹ Perhaps some might question whether Pilate comes as close as Lindars suggests to a faith response to Jesus - although others have seen Pilate's attitude to Jesus changing in the course of the encounter; Beasley-Murray claims that this presentation of Jesus in verse 14, unlike that of verses 4-6, is not intended to ridicule Jesus because "since that occasion Pilate has been moved by Jesus and defeated in his attempts to save him."⁶⁰ It is interesting to see how Pilate is viewed at this point in the narrative - and how far students of the text see him moving towards a response of his own towards Jesus. It becomes increasingly clear, surely, that John's Pilate comes to see in Jesus something which fascinates and attracts him and makes him want to spare Jesus - although he does not do so, because he is not willing to pay the cost in personal terms the possible loss of reputation and worldly position. Ought we not to feel - more than anything else - a great sense of sadness, that Pilate has let pass an opportunity to allow himself to "see" more?

The tension is still high as the Jews cry out for Jesus to be crucified and Pilate asks, "Shall I crucify your king?" Then, as Barrett says⁶¹, Pilate's irony leads up to the Jews' blasphemy - "We have no king but Caesar!" For many this is the moment when the Jews' decision is finally voiced, and we find that "no price is too great to pay in the world's struggle against the truth"; as the Jews utter the

"fateful words", Brown goes on, the real trial is over, and in the presence of Jesus the Jews have judged themselves and spoken their own sentence; although in the past Israel had proudly declared Yahweh as its king and looked to the future Messiah who would establish God's rule on earth, now "hundreds of years of waiting had been cast aside" and "the Jews" had "proclaimed the half-mad exile of Capri to be their king", renouncing their status as God's people.⁶² Many others in their own way comment on this renunciation on the part of "the Jews". Beasley-Murray sees it as "nothing less than the abandonment of the messianic hope of Israel"⁶³, Lindars speaks of the chief priests, on behalf of the people, speaking words which no Jew "could say with a clear conscience"⁶⁴ although Grayston makes his own point about the chief priests when he says that "there are circumstances in which priests will do anything to preserve their power".⁶⁵ Lightfoot comments on the way in which the Jews here betray so much of what has been precious to them. He speaks of their being "perhaps the most patriotic nation that the world has ever known", and then goes on "since two outstanding features of this patriotism were, first, their claim to be the peculiar and chosen people of God and, secondly, their hopefulness in expectation of their coming messianic king, in these words they forfeit their most cherished privileges, and also involuntarily reveal their utter condemnation; their unbelief in the Lord has led them to repudiate themselves."⁶⁶ We might recall here those words of Jesus - that those who do not know him do not know his Father either (8. 19).

We find ourselves engaged in discussion here, however, not only about the actions and motives of "the Jews", but also - as earlier - about Pilate, who is described variously as engaged in an ironic attack on the Jews, taking his revenge by humbling their national spirit, or even buying their loyalty to Rome by the death of Jesus. For Lightfoot, he has become, since he closed his ears to the implied invitation of the Lord in 18. 37, "the cat's paw of the Jews" and "the servant and accomplice of the world".⁶⁷ Culpepper's assessment of Pilate here is interesting; he sees Pilate in a sense defeating both of his antagonists, since the Jews deny their religious loyalties and Jesus is condemned, but admits it is a hollow victory, because he has tried to avoid making a decision and finally had to "deny what he senses is truth and condemn one he knows to be innocent". He goes on "Pilate exercises worldly power and in the end stands with the world by his failure to stand with Jesus against it". After pointing out that John does not play upon Pilate as a representative of either Rome or the state, he then goes on to express a view which has great relevance to the subject of this whole work, illustrating, as it does, something of the argument being proposed; he suggests that "like other characters caught between the Jews and Jesus (principally Nicodemus, the lame man and the blind man), Pilate is a study in the impossibility of compromise, the inevitability of decision, and the consequences of each alternative". In the end, he maintains, although Pilate "seems to glimpse the truth", a decision in Jesus' favour "proves too costly for him", and so, for Culpepper, Pilate represents "the futility of attempted compromise" and he cautions that the reader who "tries to temporize or escape through the gate of indecision" will find Pilate as his companion on that



path.⁶⁸ Culpepper's assessment of Pilate has much to recommend it, since it recognizes the inevitability of the outcome, given Pilate's unwillingness to risk his own status and security for the sake of one whom he knows to be innocent of any real crime. It also hints at the possibility that Pilate has seen something - "a glimpse of the truth" - in his encounter with Jesus, or in Jesus himself; this must be of value in a Gospel which sets such store by the individual's recognition of the identity of Jesus and all that he stands for. Culpepper's comments here also have a relevance to one of those questions raised earlier in chapter 1 - to which we find ourselves returning again and again - about those who may just be beginning to "see" and their standing in the eyes of the writer of this Gospel.

The episode ends, inevitably perhaps, with Pilate's handing Jesus over to be crucified and we are left to consider this encounter and the questions which it raises about Pilate's attitude and response to Jesus, as John would have us see it. Is John's Pilate "more willing to listen" because John wants to present the real possibility of this Roman official engaging in the sort of dialogue and discussion which might lead to some understanding of the nature of Jesus' identity and role? Does the presence of "the Jews" in this encounter help or hinder any progress towards understanding on the part of Pilate - do they drive him towards a defence of the prisoner because of their determination that Jesus must die, or do they have such a "hold" over this governor that he must sacrifice any desire to save Jesus because he is afraid for his own skin? Are we simply being shown a political trial, or is this much more - an engagement

between light and darkness, between the kingdom of the truth and the powers that would destroy it? Lighfoot sees here that link with John's imagery of light - the "perfect, flawless light" which the coming of the Son brings into the world, and with our central story of healing which is told in chapter 9. He goes on to suggest that "the light, which has come into the world and is embodied in Pilate's Prisoner, will show, by Pilate's response and treatment of it, where Pilate stands. Since the prisoner is in truth the unchanging and unswerving Judge, Pilate will inevitably pass on himself a sentence of acquittal or of condemnation, which the Prisoner, the Lord, will ratify"⁶⁹ At the centre of it all is that encounter, that meeting between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate's response to Jesus is different from that of the man born blind in Chapter 9, for Pilate makes no clear response of faith, no declaration of allegiance. At the centre of this enquiry is the question about whether Pilate makes any discovery at all about Jesus, whether he does, as we have heard Culpepper suggest, seem to "glimpse the truth", or whether, as Bultmann maintains, he has "personally shut his own heart to the claim of Jesus".⁷⁰ Countryman sees him "standing in at least the first glimmering of the day's light, suspecting that there is more to Jesus than first appears"⁷¹. Perhaps that is as far as we can go, on the evidence in front of us, in attributing to Pilate any clear response to Jesus or awareness of Jesus' identity or origin - a sense that Pilate perhaps sees something, perhaps beholds just a glimpse of the glory of the Word made flesh. That is certainly the stand which the present writer would prefer to take. We are left, then, with questions. Is Pilate to be viewed simply as one who has missed the opportunity to come to "see" and to "believe", for whom the encounter with Jesus has

brought nothing at all because he has not positively responded in faith, and anything less than that, in the eyes of this Gospel, is tantamount to denial or is there a hope that "standing in at least the first glimmering of the day's light" is at least better than absolute denial and rejection?

Having given some time to exploring the responses of Nicodemus and Pilate in their encounters with Jesus, we move on now, in our next chapter, to our central story and our central character as we turn to examine in some detail the story told in chapter 9 of the man born blind and his encounter with Jesus.

- 1 Gilbin, "John's Narration of the Hearing before Pilate" p. 221
- 2 Lindars, *John* p. 554
- 3 Brown, *John* p. 847
- 4 Grayston, *The Gospel of John* p. 155
- 5 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 329
- 6 Beasley-Murray *John* pp. 327-328
- 7 Lightfoot, *St John's Gospel: A Commentary* p. 308
- 8 Brodie, *The Gospel according to John* p. 532
- 9 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 651
- 10 Brown, *John* p. 858
- 11 Brown, *Death of the Messiah* pp. 748-749
- 12 Brown, *John* p. 868
- 13 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 329
- 14 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 536
- 15 Lindars, *John* p. 559
- 16 Pryor, *John: Evangelist* p. 77
- 17 Pryor, *John: Evangelist* p. 77
- 18 Sanders, *Commentary* p. 396
- 19 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 655
- 20 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 332
- 21 Gilbin, "John's Narration of the Hearing before Pilate" p. 226
- 22 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 332
- 23 Lindars, *John* p. 560
- 24 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 125
- 25 Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 261
- 26 Sanders, *Commentary* p. 397
- 27 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 538
- 28 Rensberger, "The Politics of John" p. 402
- 29 Rensberger, "The Politics of John" p. 403
- 30 Rensberger, "The Politics of John" p. 404
- 31 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 142
- 32 Brown, *John* p. 867
- 33 Brown, *John* p. 872
- 34 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* Vol. 3 p.252
- 35 Brodie, *The Gospel according to John* p. 535
- 36 Barclay, *The Gospel of John* Vol.2 p.241
- 37 Brown, *John* p. 889
- 38 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 659
- 39 Grayston, *The Gospel of John* p. 157
- 40 Grayston, *The Gospel of John* p. 157
- 41 Fenton, *The Gospel according to John* p. 191
- 42 Lindars, *John* pp. 567-568
- 43 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 663
- 44 Gilbin, "John's Narration of the Hearing before Pilate" p. 231
- 45 Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* p. 108
- 46 Fenton, *Finding the Way through John* p. 122
- 47 Brown, *John* p. 892
- 48 Brown, *John* p. 893
- 49 Brown, *John* p. 893

- 50 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 543
51 Brown, *John* p. 893
52 Brown, *John* p. 894
53 Bultmann, *John* p. 663
54 Lindars, *John* p. 569
55 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 341
56 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 545
57 Brown, *John* p. 895
58 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 545
59 Lindars, *John* p. 572
60 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 342
61 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 546
62 Brown, *John* p. 895
63 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 343
64 Lindars, *John* p. 572
65 Grayston, *The Gospel of John* p. 159
66 Lightfoot. *St John's Gospel: A Commentary* p. 315
67 Lightfoot. *St John's Gospel: A Commentary* p. 315
68 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 143
69 Lightfoot. *St John's Gospel: A Commentary* p. 308
70 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 665
71 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 126

Chapter 5. "Seeing and Believing" - and the "Man Born Blind" - An examination of the story recorded in chapter nine of John's Gospel with particular reference to the theme of Spiritual Discernment and Response.

Having explored the responses of Nicodemus and Pilate to Jesus, as they are recorded in John's Gospel, and the various ways in which their responses might be interpreted, it is time now to return to the central character as far as this study is concerned - the man born blind who encounters Jesus in John 9 - and to look closely at the way in which he is presented by the evangelist as the chapter unfolds. Having concluded that both Nicodemus and Pilate can be considered to have made a less than full and wholehearted response of faith to Jesus, it will be interesting to see whether this character is any different - whether here we come closer to discovering the sort of response which for this evangelist constitutes a real "faith" response - whether this "man born blind" really does come to "see" and "believe". It may prove helpful, as we proceed, to keep in mind those other two characters - Nicodemus and Pilate (and others too, perhaps) - since we may find useful comparisons - and contrasts - springing to mind.

Chapter 9 opens quite abruptly with John's rather unspecific "as Jesus passed by", the participle conveying, in Barrett's words "only the vaguest indication of the circumstances"¹, and then continues " he saw a man blind from birth"; already, in this first verse, then, we encounter the language of "seeing" and of

"blindness" which is to prove so important as this chapter, and the story it recounts, gradually unfolds for John chooses to say "saw" rather than "met" or "came upon". The man's condition is described as having been so "from birth" - a detail which has captured the imagination of many commentators. "Granted the symbolism of the chapter", Carson suggests, "it is likely that this detail, in addition to heightening the effect of the miracle, signals that human beings are spiritually blind from birth"², a suggestion also proposed by Barrett.³ Lindars, on the other hand, suggests that the detail is important for John's purpose because he wants to present this healing "not as an act of restoration, but as a creative act by him who is the Light of the World".⁴ Lesslie Newbigin notes that the congenital blindness of the man is interpreted both by the disciples (v. 2) and by the authorities (v. 34) as evidence of sin, but then goes on: "By the time the whole story has been told we shall understand that the man is simply representative of the entire human situation. Until the true light comes, all men are in darkness. The distinction is not between those who are blind and those who see; it is between those who know that they are blind and those who claim that they see. But this distinction cannot come to light except when the light comes. (v. 39)"⁵ This is to move too quickly, however - for the whole story unfolds rather more slowly - and we need to follow each stage, if we are to try to understand the whole.

Seeing the man as they pass by him leads the disciples who are with Jesus to pose their question: " Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Behind their question lies the assumption which they share with

many of their day that there is a clear connection between sin and suffering. Bruce suggests that in their thinking about divine retribution they have not advanced far beyond the position of Job and his friends⁶, but Newbigin would maintain that this belief that suffering and death are consequences of sin is "a belief shared by a great part of the human race"⁷ - an interesting argument. Once that assumption has been made - that suffering is due to sin - then, as Lindars points out, one must face the question of how suffering from birth can be accounted for. It might be "due to the sin of the parents", or it might be "due to ante-natal sin" - Lindars cites the example of the pregnant woman committing idolatry and thereby involving the child in the womb in such worship.⁸ John Bligh would add yet another possibility - that of sins which God foresaw he would commit.⁹ There is another way of hearing what is going on here suggested by Kenneth Grayston, that "in this naive and extraordinary healing we hear the questioning of Jews who say: 'Why were we born blind? Did we sin, or our parents?' And Jesus, in effect, replies: 'You are what you are that God's power may be displayed in curing you'."¹⁰ This, however, takes our minds away from the immediate discussion. Jesus' reply to their question, however, seems to point them away from the notion of sin altogether, as he speaks of the man being born blind "in order that" or "with the result that" (Barrett points to both in his consideration of *ἵνα* in verse two¹¹) God's work might be manifest in him - a thought which Brown suggests "touches upon God's manipulation of history to glorify his name"¹², although, as Barrett reminds us "John would not suppose that the man's birth and blindness were outside the control, and therefore the purpose, of God".¹³ The purpose of the

blind man's suffering, then, Bultmann maintains, is the same as that of Lazarus' illness (11. 4) - which was also the purpose of the miracle at Cana (2. 11)¹⁴, and this purpose we might express as being that the glory of God might be manifested through the being and the actions of Jesus. Such passages - and such reminders - help us to see that we may well bring to such a text rather different questions from the questions posed by its first readers. The writer of this Gospel makes it very clear that he has recorded these "signs" in order that others may come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God - and have life in his name (20. 30-31); perhaps we are so often taken up with our questions about how we might be able to explain what is recorded as having happened in biblical narrative, that we are not concerned to ask questions about what might come about as a result of the events recorded.

Having turned their attention from the cause of the man's suffering to its "possibilities for God's purpose"¹⁵, Jesus speaks of the need for them to work the "works of him who sent me" while it is day - reminding them, perhaps as a warning, that night is coming "when no one can work"; Lindars says that it is impossible to avoid here the implication that "it is the Passion that will bring on the darkness all too soon"¹⁶ ... and we might recall, as Bruce does, that in John 13. 30 Judas went out into the "night", while the other disciples remained in the circle of the true light while the true light was with them (cf. 12. 35f.)¹⁷. Jesus then adds that as long as he is in the world he is "the light of the world". In these verses John may have drawn on the language of proverbial wisdom, as many have suggested, but he is using those words and ideas in a very

"Johannine" manner, as he speaks of Jesus as the one who has been "sent", and as he draws the contrast between night and day at the very beginning of a story which will be all about light and darkness. Bligh sees here one of a series of warnings addressed by Christ to the Jews, telling them their opportunity for belief is of limited duration. "The gospel is not preached every day to every man; each man has his *kairos*, his opportunity for decision, which, if missed, may never come again."¹⁸ Jesus' description of himself here as the "light of the world" is reminiscent of his even more explicit words recorded in the previous chapter: " I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8. 12) - words which brought upon him the harsh judgment of the Pharisees, who maintained that he was "bearing witness" to himself, making claims about himself which could not be substantiated. This story, of the healing of the blind man and all that followed that healing, is a story which really illustrates the effect of the coming of the light into the world of men and women. "The miracle about to be narrated", according to Beasley-Murray, "is a sign that Jesus is the source of light for *all* humankind".¹⁹

"As he said this" he spat upon the ground There is no mention of a request from the blind man for healing, or any preliminary words from Jesus; "having declared that his mission in the world is to be its light", Barrett comments here, "Jesus proceeds at once to illustrate his words by giving light to the blind man, and by judging those who, confident in their own vision, turn their back upon the true light."²⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, commenting on the way in which Jesus

proceeds immediately to action here, makes a valuable point when he says: "No questions are asked about the faith of the blind man. His faith will be the result - slowly matured - of Jesus' action, not its precondition."²¹ At this point, at the outset of the narrative, the man is simply acted upon - for he is not even asked if he wishes to be healed (unlike the man at the pool in 5. 6). Jesus makes clay of the spittle - commonly thought in the ancient world to have curative powers, as in the story of Vespasian at Alexandria which Barrett quotes from Tacitus *Historiae* IV, 81 ²² - and anoints the man's eyes. (Incidentally, the use of spittle also features in two healing miracles in Mark's Gospel - in Mark 7. 33 and 8. 23.) That anointing itself does not immediately cause the man to see, however - as Newbigin points out - for he is then ordered to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. "His going is itself an act of faith in Jesus - albeit faith at an elementary level", says Newbigin. "Unlike Naaman the Syrian in similar circumstances (II Kings 5. 10 - 12) he obeys without question, and receives the gift of sight."²³ Schnackenburg also recalls the unwillingness of Naaman, but then goes on to see the man's obedience "without demur" as reminiscent of "the man in the royal service, whom Jesus sent back to his son's sickbed with no more than a word (4. 50)", which he says may be "a hint of the blind beggar's readiness to believe."²⁴ This is indeed an interesting suggestion - that the man's readiness to take Jesus at his word and go to wash in the pool is an indication quite early in the chapter that he is prepared to listen to Jesus; perhaps he is going to be one who will really "see" and "believe" who Jesus is. Dodd sees the man's readiness to obey the command of Jesus as "an essential element in the cure", and, in fact, "a measure of his faith", although he concedes that John does not

use the term. He goes on to say that "the fact that he goes to Siloam unaccompanied (it would appear) by Jesus, supported only by his own faith and determination, makes the contribution of the patient to his own recovery more marked, in contrast to the blind man and the deaf mute in Mark, who are passive throughout."²⁵ We are already beginning to see much that is positive about this man. Much is made by some commentators of the derivation of the name of the pool - perhaps there is some significance in the "sent" aspect, since for this Gospel writer Jesus is the one "sent" from God, emphasizing his divine origin. This whole chapter is full of symbolic value and significant detail, and the action of Jesus here and the command given to the blind man are in keeping with the whole. Hoskyns reads it thus: "The eyes, which are to see the Christ (v. 37) are made whole, or perhaps created, from the dust of the ground and the spittle of the Lord, and by washing in the water of *Siloam*, that is, of *him who has been sent*."²⁶ The second part of verse seven tells simply "So he went and he washed and he came back seeing" and in one sense the healing miracle is completed at that point, although in another sense it has only just begun - for there is much more to come before this story is really over.

One of the remarkable features of John's handling of what might well have been traditional material is the way in which this simple healing story is expanded until it becomes a whole series of consecutive scenes in which the story of this man unfolds - "seven memorable scenes", according to Culpepper, in which "the rise of the blind man to spiritual insight and the progressive unmasking of the Pharisees' blindness are impressed upon the reader"²⁷. Martyn finds here

what he calls a "dramatic expansion" of the original miracle story, which brings into play new characters and new accents - that it was a Sabbath healing, the identity of Jesus, synagogue discipline, discipleship to Moses or to Jesus, faith in the Son of Man²⁸; he goes on, of course, to suggest that we might find reflected in this series of scenes a reflection of some "definite situation" in the life of John's church. Whether we pursue Martyn's ideas or not, we have to admit that this is not simply a brief account of a simple miracle story - for into this drama of several scenes John introduces more players who all have a significant role to play ... neighbours and those who had known the man, his parents, the Pharisees and "the Jews", and into the discussion about the healing and the healer other things are introduced - the observance of the Sabbath, questions about origin and authority, and the identity of the Son of Man. We move on, then, into the scenes which are to follow. Perhaps we might see an analogy here to the situation we find in chapter 6 - when the shift of focus moves from the feeding of the multitude to the discourse about the implications of the event, and what it means to believe that Jesus is the "bread of life", although we might also want to take note of Dodd's interesting comment that in this episode "the significance of the σημειον is divulged, not in an accompanying discourse, but by brief insertions into the narrative itself."²⁹

The next verses introduce into the action the neighbours of the formerly blind man and those who had regularly seen him begging in the past; their discussion of what has happened to him constitutes the next scene in the drama - the first of those scenes which in the opinion of Schnackenburg have as their purpose

"to confirm the fact of the healing and its testimony to Jesus", involving questions of identity, method and theological consequence.³⁰ Schnackenburg sees these folk as appropriate first witnesses; since the man had been a beggar he would have been a familiar sight to many people - and some of them now share their perplexity and amazement at the fact that he is now sighted. Newbigin goes a little further, perhaps, when he suggests that "the new man in Christ is so changed that the neighbours are not sure that it is the same man whom they had known".³¹ The man himself confirms his identity for them (v. 9), and when they question him about the "method" of the healing he gives a fairly blunt account of what happened: "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went and I washed and I received my sight." *The man called Jesus* is how he speaks of his healer at this point in the narrative, and it is worth pausing to note this, for as the story continues and the man moves closer and closer to faith, so the way in which he speaks of Jesus changes - a development which we shall mark as we follow the narrative. If, as our argument would suggest, this is a story about the way in which an individual comes to see who Jesus is and then responds in faith to Jesus as the Christ, then the way in which he sees Jesus at different stages in that process is of real significance. Lindars maintains that the man's use of such a "colourless description" at this point is not accidental; "the ensuing dialogue", he goes on, "will show successive stages in the enlightenment of the man's understanding about Jesus. But he begins without any distinctive title for him. The fact that Jesus has done the cure is the only clue to his identity."³² Barrett makes a similar point when he says that these

words "are intended as a description of Jesus in purely human terms" and that "the blind man has much to learn before he makes the confession and offers the worship of v. 38."³³ This sense of the distance still to be travelled by the man is highlighted by Schnackenburg when he comments on the fact that the man can say nothing when he is questioned about the whereabouts of Jesus except "I don't know" and yet Schnackenburg sees the man's potential, sees that he "still has a long way to go to reach full faith in Jesus, but he takes it in the face of the opposition of unbelief until Jesus himself enables him to take the last step towards faith."³⁴ Perhaps we are again looking too far ahead - for the moment the man speaks only of "the man called Jesus", whose whereabouts are unknown to him but this scene does show us the beginning of the man's "ready and consistent witness to 'the man called Jesus'" which Beasley-Murray would maintain runs through the whole narrative in its varied changes of scene, alongside the probing questioning which the man faces.³⁵

The next episode begins with the evangelist stating that "they brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind" although we are not told precisely who brought him, or their reason for doing so. We assume that it was the neighbours and the folk who had known him as a beggar? Did they take him to the Pharisees to get some sort of "official" religious enquiry about or explanation of what had happened to this man? There seems to be no need to assume hostility on the part of the neighbours,³⁶ for as Carson says " they could not have known that the healed man would be subjected to interrogation and expulsion from the synagogue."³⁷ Bultmann here interjects the reader's point of

view - the reader who "knows that this is precisely the wrong course of action, for the unexpected and new should not be subjected to the old manageable standards"³⁸. Such questions are clearly not important enough for the evangelist to take time over them as the narrative moves on. Then, at verse 14, the question of the Sabbath and its observance is introduced; as in chapter 5 (v. 10), it is only after the healing has been effected that we are told that "it was a sabbath day when ...", and the information that the healing took place on the Sabbath is added "almost as an afterthought"³⁹. As many commentators have suggested, it seems clear that the issue is introduced at this point in the narrative in order to set the scene for the theological debate which is to follow.

As the Pharisees question the man again, and he repeats his story, we are plunged into the perplexity facing these religious leaders: whether a man who was a law-breaker could possibly be from God. He was most certainly a law-breaker, for it seems that he had broken several of the regulations concerning the observance of the Sabbath - in curing an affliction which could have waited another day, in kneading (one of the thirty-nine "works" forbidden on the Sabbath according to Mishnah *Shabbath* 7: 2), in the anointing of the eyes with spittle - more than enough to convict him in the eyes of the zealous. Some of the Pharisees, however, were clearly perplexed, for they maintain that "a sinner" could not do "such signs" (evidence, perhaps, that they have heard of other "signs" performed by Jesus). "The question of Jesus," says Raymond Brown, "divides the Pharisees, even as it divided the crowd in vii 43"⁴⁰ and this comment about division among the Pharisees here may serve as a reminder that

for this evangelist there is a sense in which the coming of Jesus is often divisive, as men and women choose whether or not to respond to that coming and the challenges it brings. This division among the Pharisees leads to more questioning for the formerly blind man, but it is interesting, and for the purpose of this work very significant, that this man comes to faith against the background of - in fact in the face of - all the perplexity and conflict about the identity and the origin and the authority of Jesus. Perhaps the evangelist is showing us here the way in which some people come to faith. Bultmann suggests that the evangelist here seeks to portray "the struggle of darkness against the light" and to show "the sacrifice which is implied in the decision of faith".⁴¹

The man certainly makes progress along the way as they question him further and then require an answer to their: "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" The man's answer: "He is a prophet" is a step further than "the man called Jesus" - his eyes are opening wider⁴² - and it is perhaps "the most natural suggestion in explanation of the miracle"⁴³; it does clearly carry the suggestion that Jesus is "from God", rather than "a sinner", in the terms of the Pharisees' dispute. In effect, Barrett suggests, the man has been "provoked to align himself with Jesus" - a direct contrast, Barrett adds, to the lame man in chapter 5.⁴⁴ These two - the lame man of chapter 5 and the blind man of chapter 9 - respond in very different ways to their encounter with Jesus and his healing of their afflictions. Since we have as a central concern the way in which individuals respond to Jesus, it is useful to have others to set alongside the

blind man, by way of comparison or contrast. The lame man of chapter 5, as we noted earlier in chapter 1 of our study, is very different; he shows very little enthusiasm, makes no progress towards faith - and when he discovers the identity of the hitherto unknown character who has made him well, he is happy to report to the Jews the fact that Jesus was responsible for his sabbath healing. There seems to be something rather churlish and ungrateful about him when we see him alongside this man in chapter 9 who has now got to the stage of declaring Jesus to be "a prophet". Countryman examines the major contrasts between the two miracles and concludes that "the Siloam washing reverses all that went wrong with that of Bethzatha", that the difference lies in the presence or absence of sin because the man born blind does not refuse to see in Jesus the light of the world."⁴⁵ Countryman goes on to suggest that when the man gives his opinion here he does so without hesitation and with a confidence which leads one to recall the Samaritan woman in 4. 19 (another character who gained much from her encounter with Jesus) and "the equal certainty of the crowds in 6. 14 and 7. 40".⁴⁶ There are signs throughout this Gospel that sometimes men and women are able to discern something of the nature of Jesus - sometimes quite surprising folk who are not the most officially qualified in religious affairs! Here the Samaritan woman and the man born blind have quite a lot in common, since both would have been regarded as outside of the most exclusive religious circles. It is no wonder that the religious leaders have problems with situations like this one when a blind beggar declares an apparent Law-breaker to be a prophet.

Verse 16 opens with "the Jews" (not "the Pharisees" now - although Barrett suggests that John uses the terms indiscriminately) calling the parents of the blind man in order to question them; they want the parents to provide confirmation that this is their son, that he was indeed born blind and to provide whatever information they can about the circumstances in which he has regained his sight. Carson, however, sees the Jews here confronting the dilemma of their own disunity concerning Jesus and hoping "that that discovery of some mistake will resolve their dilemma".⁴⁷ The man's parents - if they had been present at the healing and been willing to speak - could have acted as the two witnesses required by the law to attest that the miracle had occurred. Barrett sees here a common feature of the miracle stories - a clarification of the circumstances of the cure and the gravity of the disease - being shaped by the main theme here "the trial of the man, and of Jesus through the man, and of the Jews through Jesus."⁴⁸ This is an interesting comment which recognizes the way in which the reactions of the individuals and groups in this story affect one another as they seek to come to terms with what they meet in Jesus. We are already aware that it is not only the blind man's response to Jesus which is being traced in this story; there will be opportunity later to reflect upon the way in which "the Jews" also make a journey in this chapter. We return to the parents whose answer to the Jews' questions reveals immediately their reluctance to get involved in what is going on here. Their "sharp prudence"⁴⁹, as Schnackenburg calls it, in referring their questioners back to their son, may at first be quite surprising, but then verses 22-23 introduce us to their motives as John presents them, and we find ourselves immersed in the evangelist's

commentary, perhaps even inhabiting two worlds at the same time - the world of Jesus' time on earth and the world of the Johannine church - as we hear of penalties imposed for confessing Jesus to be the Christ. It is such verses as these, of course, which have inspired the work of those - like Martyn and Brown - who have seen in this Gospel so much that reflects the life-situation of John's church. We move on, noting that the man's parents are not going to give him any support, so that whatever answer he gives he will have to stand alone and face the consequences. "The only liberated character is the man who is the center of the story, and both parties seek to hang all responsibility on him"⁵⁰. There is to be no ordinary human support or company for this man on his journey to faith. The evangelist may even be seeking to inspire the readers of the Gospel to "a courageous confession like that of the healed man".⁵¹

The next scene brings us a second questioning of the man by the Pharisees. This second questioning might be taken as a sign that they are acting correctly and taking "considerable trouble" over the matter, whereas in reality "they have already made up their minds: 'We know that this man is a sinner'"⁵². They begin by using their authority - as religious leaders - in an attempt to get the man to change his story - "Give God the praise; we know this man is a sinner." This is clearly a trial scene - although there is surely more than the blind man "on trial" and it is a trial scene "rich in the tragic irony of which the evangelist is master", according to Dodd, who goes on: "The one-time beggar stands before his betters, to be badgered into denying the one thing of which he is certain. But the defendant proper is Jesus Himself, judged *in absentia*".⁵³ The man,

however, is not willing to be bullied or intimidated, and he sticks to his story; he does not pass judgment on whether Jesus is a sinner or not, but he declares the one thing he does know beyond the shadow of a doubt ... "one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see." In a sense the man is "giving God the praise", but it is not by denial, but by fearlessly reiterating the truth that he knows and has experienced.⁵⁴ Brown sees in this verse the man "wondering if Jesus is not beyond the Law since he obviously did good in restoring sight"⁵⁵, which is an interesting way of suggesting what others might also find here - the suggestion that "the Law itself was now superseded" in Jesus "the only possible conclusion that could be drawn from the two given facts (the man's recovered sight, and the conviction of Jesus by the Law of sinfulness)."⁵⁶ If Brown's suggestion (above) is a fair one, then this man, as he moves along the road to faith, is gaining (or being given) considerable insight into the nature and significance of Jesus. We begin to see that he is to gain much more than physical sight as a result of his encounter with Jesus. We see, too, that this man is not going to be easily intimidated, even by those who feel that they know more than he does. "Their arrogant certainty conflicts with his own experience that he was healed by Jesus and he will not relinquish his hold in this fact."⁵⁷ Bligh is perhaps right in his suggestion that in his account of this second interrogation, St. John shows us how both sides clarify their position through conflict.⁵⁸

As the Pharisees press on with their questioning, they ask him again for an account of what Jesus did and how exactly his sight was restored. The man

becomes not a little impatient with these religious leaders who are so keen to ask questions, but seem so unwilling or unable to hear what is said to them. Perhaps, as Carson maintains, the healed man is discovering that "the professed impartiality of his interlocutors is nothing more than a show."⁵⁹ In his reply he in turn poses questions to them - "Why do you want to hear it again?" and then the Johannine irony of - "Do you too want to become his disciples?" By pretending that he believes them really to be in earnest, he treats the insincerity of the inquiry with the greatest possible irony.⁶⁰ Schnackenburg sees here the evangelist wanting to bring back the idea of discipleship, and to expose the hostility of the Pharisees to Jesus' disciples⁶¹, which is, of course, what happens as the religious leaders make their stand, reviling the man: "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses" (v. 28). The battle lines would seem to be drawn, then, as Jesus and Moses, with their disciples, "are intentionally thrown into sharp contrast"⁶² and the Pharisees take their stand on the undoubted pedigree of Moses - although, as Pryor reminds us, their refusal to believe disqualifies them as disciples of Moses, for Moses bears witness to Jesus (5. 45-46)⁶³. At the same time the Pharisees are declaring "as for this man, we do not know where he comes from" - another highly charged phrase for those who are in tune with John's irony. The whole question of the origin of Jesus, where he really comes from, runs through this Gospel - from the Prologue's "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us", and Nathanael's "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (1. 46), through Jesus' ironic question as he taught in the Temple "You know me, and you know where I come from?" (7. 28), right through to the frightened Pilate asking Jesus, "Where are

you from?" (19. 9). Perhaps this is one of the key questions which a man or a woman has to face about Jesus on their way to faith - whether Jesus really is "from above", whether he really has his origin with God, rather than the world which is "below". In all of this, Bruce maintains, the evangelist practises his own form of irony: "he and his readers know of Jesus' true origin; they know, moreover, that while 'the law was given through Moses', the full revelation of God came through Jesus Christ (1. 17)".⁶⁴

This man in chapter nine is being pushed by the Pharisees to discredit Jesus; perhaps their bullying tactics merely serve to help him to acknowledge more quickly and more certainly the truth about the real origin of Jesus. Something like this is suggested by Countryman in his assessment of what is happening at this point in the action when he says that this man "will not cooperate with their effort to undermine the one who healed him, and when pressed he reacts angrily. At last his own assessment of the event comes out: from the beginning of time there has been nothing like it (strong echo of the prologue), and it is therefore a world-shattering and a world-building event."⁶⁵ Johannine irony comes into play again with the man's, "Why this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes". The man is now instructing **them**, the religious authorities, about who is heard by God and who does God's will, and then he concludes: " If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" - words which are reminiscent of the opening words of Nicodemus when he came to Jesus by night, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God", which are followed by, "for no one can do these signs that you do,

unless God is with him." The blind man has come to the same conclusion; again we find ourselves placing side by side characters who in this Gospel are brought face to face with Jesus and have to make decisions about his nature and his origin and his significance in their lives. This man's declaration that Jesus is "from God" is another important step in his progress towards faith (whereas with Nicodemus it was more of an opening comment, to lead into a dialogue with Jesus), and for the formerly blind man it was in many ways a very dangerous stand, because it enraged the Pharisees and gave them enough evidence against him for them to throw him out. They insult him with their "born in utter sin", although they do not see that here they are contradicting themselves, for now it suits them to accept the fact of his blindness which a short while before they had doubted (v. 18).⁶⁶ They will not have him telling them their business. "How dare he teach them, who explore the Scriptures and faithfully observe the Law!" Schnackenburg goes on: "It is the blindness of people who insist on their own cleverness and authority. When arguments fail, force takes over. 'They cast him out'.⁶⁷ We can trace here, if we choose, parallels with the life-situation of the Johannine church; on a more direct reading we see a man who has refused to turn his back on Jesus - the one who gave him his sight - being punished by those religious leaders who cannot cope with Jesus, nor with the effect which Jesus is having on the lives of those who are able to respond to him. These outraged Pharisees reject the man, and the miracle, and the One through whom God wrought it, says Beasley Murray, who goes on to say that in doing so. "they reject the shining of the Light upon

them, and plunge further into their darkness", illustrating the perpetual truth of 1. 3-4 and the contemporary truth of 3. 19-21.⁶⁸

The man, then, has been cast out by the religious authorities for his declaration in favour of Jesus. Bligh maintains that this man born blind has a claim to be considered the first martyr, since "he is the first person who is known to have suffered for bearing witness to his faith in Jesus". Here again, then, we meet the notion of seeing - and believing - and bearing witness, which we noted first in chapter 1 in relation to the Samaritan woman (page 11). In fact Bligh goes on to draw comparisons between the man's lot and Christ's, suggesting that he exemplifies the saying that "the servant is not greater than his Lord" (15. 20)⁶⁹ Verse 35 tells us that when Jesus heard of what had happened to him, he found him and put to him the challenging question: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus found him. We cannot miss the obvious contrast between the treatment which the man receives from the Pharisees who expelled him and the very different treatment he is accorded by Jesus who "takes responsibility for him", according to Schnackenburg, because he will not "reject anyone the Father brings to him (6. 38)", calling by name "everyone who belongs to his flock (10. 3)"⁷⁰. Indeed Bruce sees the once blind man here as "a sample of those who are called out of the Jewish fold to become members of the flock of the good shepherd"⁷¹, perhaps providing a foretaste of the language of chapter 10. It is not surprising that this "finding" of the man by Jesus has captured the imagination of many, and led others to comment on its significance within the Gospel story. So we find William Temple declaring that the man driven out by

the Pharisaic court is not left to wander as an outcast because "Jesus *found* him. The man did not find Jesus; Jesus found him. That is the deepest truth of Christian faith; Jesus found me."⁷² William Barclay makes a similar point when, after quoting Chrysostom's "the Jews cast him out of the Temple; the Lord of the Temple found him", he goes on to declare that "Jesus is always true to the man who is true to him".⁷³ Brown points out that Jesus "finding" the man not only serves as a contrast to the actions of the Pharisees but also illustrates Jesus' promise in 6. 37: " Anyone who comes to me I will never drive out".⁷⁴ Barrett sets this action of Jesus on the larger scene of the whole Gospel of John and one of its major themes of light and darkness; declaring that the story is not yet complete, he sees the light as being divisive, for "the light has shone and it has created division between the children of light and the children of darkness. The Jews cast out the man (and so have rejected Jesus); he for his part refuses to deny the light that has come to him in the opening of his eyes. But he has not yet understood what has taken place, or come to faith in Jesus. Jesus therefore, taking the initiative (cf. 5. 14), as he must, *finds* the man."⁷⁵ Barrett captures something of the sense of anticipation one feels at the point where Jesus seeks the man out; something is going to come of this man's encounter with Jesus.

Jesus, then, finds the man - and perhaps we sense that something significant is going to happen as Jesus puts the question: " Do you believe in the Son of man?" Schnackenburg suggests that the $\Sigma\upsilon$ here carries " a polemical stress", for the others do not believe, but this man has not been afraid of their threats. He goes on to make some interesting claims about what is happening here and

in some of the other encounters in this Gospel between Jesus and individual characters who ask questions - claims which are of considerable interest if we are examining faith responses in the Gospel. He begins by suggesting that the man "has gone as far as he could with his Jewish mentality and believing reflection, but only Jesus can enable him to take the last step to faith in Christ", and he compares Jesus' clear revelation of himself here with Jesus' behaviour towards the Samaritan woman (4. 23-26), suggesting that "questioning expectation of the Messiah is met by Jesus with immediate fulfilment". He sees the content of Jesus' revelation here ("Son of man" - we will explore something of the significance of the title itself in a moment) and the firm answer of the cured man who falls at Jesus' feet in worship as representing an advance on the previous scene, and then he goes on to suggest that there is then "a further progression" from Jesus' encounter with the man cured of blindness in the encounter of the Risen Lord with Thomas in 20. 27-29. Although this seems an interesting proposition, and although some might find in Thomas' "My Lord and my God!" some sort of "advance" on the blind man's "Lord, I believe", others might well argue that the blind man's coming to faith and his declaration of that faith in the face of opposition and possible persecution is as "complete" as any other in this Gospel - which is, in fact, the proposition suggested in this thesis. However there is no argument with the final point made by Schnackenburg here that "all of these scenes of an encounter in dialogue between believers and the revealer have exemplary significance for the evangelist."⁷⁶ It is surely by way of the various accounts of individuals encountering Jesus and then responding as far as they are able that this

evangelist shows us what it means to come to faith and how it happens, for this theme of coming to see and to believe is of central importance to this Gospel; in fact, Fenton would suggest that many of these "minor" characters are there for the most part simply to illustrate this central theme of how individuals come to faith and the evangelist's central purpose in writing - made explicit in 20. 31 - "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name".⁷⁷

Perhaps we need to pause here for just a moment to consider John's use here of the title "Son of man" - a title which we meet in other important passages in this Gospel of John, although we will not explore any further than that - for this is a title, and a subject, which has greatly exercised scholars. In 1. 51 Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see "greater things", even heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending "upon the Son of man", in 3. 14 Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one has ascended into heaven but "he who descended from heaven, the Son of man" and in chapter 6 when some disciples are offended at the "hard saying" about eating "the flesh of the Son of man" (6. 53), Jesus asks: "What if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?" (6. 62) In all of these examples there is the clear link with John's picture of Jesus as the one who "came down from heaven", the one whose origin is "from above"; in John's record, then, we might see Jesus - the Word made flesh - as the one in whose person heaven itself is opened up for the believer (1. 51). This title, then, is not a "lesser" title, or a "lesser" confession of faith, surely, than the others used in this Gospel - "Son of God", "King of Israel" (1. 49), "the Christ,

the Son of God, he who is coming into the world (11. 27). When Brown asks why Jesus presents himself to the former blind man under the title of the Son of Man he suggests that it is because vv. 39 - 41 have a theme of judgment and "that judgment is a frequent setting for the figure of the Son of Man"⁷⁸; this is a suggestion worth considering, perhaps, if we need to find a reason why John used this particular title in this particular episode.

This challenge from Jesus: "Do you believe in the Son of man?" is in some ways, then, a crucial moment. The man's question in turn: "And who is he, Sir, that I may believe in him?" is presumably not about the meaning of the title, but rather a question about the identity of the one bearing the title. Is this question put in, as Lindars suggests, to heighten the effect"? Lindars adds the interesting comment that "the respectful **sir** (cf. 4. 19) is the attitude of the disciple ready to receive the master's teaching", since, in spite of the "splendid affirmation" of verse 33, "the man still has to learn the truth about Jesus contained in the title Son of Man".⁷⁹ Does the man suspect that Jesus is talking about himself - and if so, are we to see this exchange as evidence of his "readiness to believe"?⁸⁰ Jesus' words to the man in response to this question are surely charged with significance in an encounter which is all about blindness and sight, seeing and refusing to see, for he declares: "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you". Beasley-Murray is surely right when he notes a poignancy in these words to the formerly blind man. "This is the first time he has been able to see the face of Jesus; and he learns that he is actually looking on the Son of Man!"⁸¹ While we are aware that there are others in this story who are unwilling to see in

Jesus anything other than a Law-breaker and a source of some perplexity when he performs such signs, at this point in the narrative our attention is focused on this one man who **is** prepared to accept the truth, **is** prepared to see, and finds that he receives not just physical sight in eyes which have thus far been useless, but he also receives another gift of sight, in the ability to discern with the eyes of faith the true identity of his healer - to see and believe that it is none other than "the Christ, the Son of God." Isn't it true to say that in the experience of this once blind man we have the experience which this evangelist wants for every one of his readers - to see and to believe. Barrett reminds us here that whereas in Mark (14. 62) seeing the Son of man is a future event, in John - while the eschatological background remains - the Son of man can be seen by faith (we might think again of the image in 1. 51 of heaven opened) - but only by faith; he reminds us of the message of John 14. 9, that "truly to see Jesus is to see God."⁸²

"The effect of this revelation", says Beasley-Murray, "is as overwhelming as that to the Samaritan woman: the latter runs to her village to proclaim the advent of the Messiah, the former prostrates himself before Jesus"⁸³. Again we see the comparison made between these two figures in their responses - very positive responses to Jesus. This man's response is to declare, "Lord, I believe" and to worship - words and action in response to Jesus' revelation of himself. Bultmann sees here - in Jesus' words and the man's response - an interdependence of word and experience. He suggests that the immediate cause of the man's confession is neither a theophany, nor a straightforward demand

that he should believe, but that "whereas man's experience would remain obscure to him without the intervention of the spoken word, so too the word itself is only intelligible because it reveals to man the meaning of his own experience".⁸⁴ The man's confession of faith in verse 38 is for some an important part of the healing story - in Countryman's words "the most adequate response to Jesus in the Gospel thus far, comparable to the faith of Mary and of the royal official in the Cana miracles, yet going far beyond them"⁸⁵, while others see these words of 38-39a as a liturgical interpolation stemming from the use of this chapter in baptismal practices from an early date. Indeed, Calvin L. Porter has produced an interesting article whose thesis is that the words of John 38-39a ("He said, 'Lord, I believe'; and he worshipped him. Jesus said ...") were not in the original text of the Gospel of John, but were added later - as a result of the liturgical use of this episode of the healing of the man born blind in the early Christian community, especially in relation to the preparation of the catechumens for baptism and their confession of faith.⁸⁶ Whether we see that sort of significance in these words or not, we cannot deny that this man comes to faith - and is prepared to confess that faith openly, whatever the cost. For this story the words express the man's acceptance of the truth about Jesus - that he the Son of man and therefore he is worthy of the worship which he now offers (9. 38). He may be, as some have seen him in relation to the life-situation of the Johannine church, "a model of those who have come from signs to an authentic faith and are excluded from the synagogue"⁸⁷, but he is, first and foremost, one who has come to true faith in Jesus. He has come from speaking of Jesus as simply "the man called Jesus", to a willingness to declare, "He is a

prophet", then to recognize and claim that Jesus is "from God" and then finally to confess, "Lord, I believe" and to bow in worship. He has surely travelled a long way. Hoskyns sees the blind man passing out of the story at this point, and doing so "as the typical believer, the worshipper of God in Spirit and in Truth". "This", he says, "is the true climax of the narrative and the purpose for which it was told".⁸⁸

As our formerly blind man has made his own journey towards faith in Jesus as the Christ, some would argue that others in this chapter have made a journey in a different direction: that "the Pharisees" or "the Jews" have actually moved further and further away from a position where they might have been able to see something of the nature, the identity or the origin of Jesus, that they have hardened their hearts - or their hearts have been hardened - against him, and that in their growing opposition to this formerly blind man we can witness their growing opposition to Jesus - and their judgment of him. Judgment is, indeed, a central theme of the last verses of the chapter - and the suggestion that all the folk involved in the actions of this chapter have, in a sense, brought about a judgment upon themselves, and that if, as we have suggested several times already, the coming of Jesus has been divisive, then the characters concerned have to take some of the responsibility for that. Bultmann suggests that the "blind" and the "seeing", for whom Jesus' coming means the κριμα, do not refer to any particular definable groups which were present before his coming, but that rather *"everyone"* must face the question to which of the two groups he wants to belong".⁸⁹ This man has made his stand, declaring his faith; others

have made an equally determined stand in their opposition to Jesus and their unwillingness to see or to believe. Stibbe suggests that their unbelief is expressed in a number of statements which they make about Jesus, and that "just as there is a progressive nature about the blind man's confessions, so there is a progressive nature about those made by the Pharisees/Jews", a progression which is negative this time rather than positive, as they become progressively blind about Jesus, so that they begin with, "This man is not from God because he does not keep the Sabbath" (v. 16), proceed to call him "a sinner" (v. 24) and finally proclaim, "We don't even know where he comes from" (v. 28). For Stibbe, these statements mark them out as the "truly blind people" in the story and as the "true sinners" because, as he points out, "the essence of sin in John is unbelief about Jesus".⁹⁰ We may be reminded again here of the words of the Prologue about those who received Jesus and those who did not receive him (1. 11-13).

In the last few verses of the chapter, John presents us with an exchange between Jesus and some of these Pharisees, which begins with Jesus speaking of judgment - and of sight and blindness: "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind" (v. 39). Mention of the coming of Jesus into the world inevitably makes one think of earlier verses in this Gospel, like the declarations which follow the exchange with Nicodemus in chapter 3. There we read first that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to

condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (3. 16-17), but then these words about love and salvation are followed by a verse which makes clear the importance of men believing when the Son comes to them, that "he who believes in him is not condemned," but that "he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God", and then finally clear declarations about the link between judgment, the language of light and darkness and the crucial decisions which are made by individuals when they come face to face with the Light of the World - declarations which have such a clear relevance to the events and the exchanges of chapter 9: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it might be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God" (3. 19-21).

So now, in our chapter 9, as the formerly blind man declares, "Lord, I believe" and worships, Jesus says that his coming was for judgment, and then adds the words which seem to suggest that "the cutting edge of the judgment is shown in the fact that those who do not see become sighted and the sighted become blind".⁹¹ We may find here, in these apparently paradoxical words about the blind seeing and the sighted becoming blind, reminders of Isaiah. We might think of, for example, Isaiah 29. 18 "and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see", and the reference in 42. 20 to the servant of the Lord who "sees many things, but does not observe them" ... or perhaps

especially the language of Isaiah 6: "Hear, and Hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (6. 9-10), words to which John makes reference in 12. 37 ff. We might think, too, of Matthew's reference to the Pharisees as "blind guides" (23. 16), but essentially these words are all about what has happened in this story of the blind man and those around him in chapter 9, and about what happens every time men and women come face to face with Jesus, and have to make a decision for themselves about how they are going to respond. Barrett says simply "to receive Jesus is to receive the light of the world; to reject him is to reject the light, to close one's eyes, and to become blind."⁹² We can at least begin to understand the relevance of it all to the characters in this chapter, both the man at the centre of the action who has received so much as a result of his encounter with Jesus - physical sight, and the ability to discern the true identity of Jesus which leads to faith, "sight in his believing heart", and those who think they know, think they can see, but who in reality "are blind and are losing their ability to perceive spiritual and divine realities".⁹³ It is from among this group that voices come to challenge Jesus' latest words, although "some of the Pharisees" may sound a little contrived dramatically, perhaps, given that v. 35 tells us that Jesus had sought the man out. They seem to be asking now whether his words refer to them: "Are we also blind?" Jesus' reply to them makes clear their responsibility for their own blindness: "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see', your guilt remains." The chilling truth would seem to be

that they have prevented themselves from "coming" to Jesus, from "seeing" who he really is, as a result of their own arrogance and stubborn allegiance to their own narrow interpretation of how things must be.

"It is easy", says Countryman commenting on this passage, "to claim one's own religious stance as light and not know that it is dark"⁹⁴, and this would surely serve as a lesson to anyone who claims to have a knowledge of the truth; if it is really so difficult to know where one stands, then perhaps "the wise course is to claim nothing for oneself " if "unrecognized or unacknowledged blindness is the source and guarantee of sin."⁹⁵ Countryman goes on to speak of the sight gained by the once-blind man in this way: "True sight is to see things as they really are the essence of the blind man's enlightenment was to recognize in Jesus the touchstone of reality as long as one is oriented towards the son, one sees; turn toward some other standard of reality, and one is blind".⁹⁶ These last verses of the chapter, however, are not so much about the blind man as about those who really are blind, those who "enjoy the light of the Law" and are "unwilling to leave it for more perfect illumination" so that they become blind, "losing the light they have"⁹⁷. The judgment which falls on these men seems harsh and unrelenting, for Jesus says that their guilt "remains". Although, as Brown points out here, the theme of "remaining" is a common one on this Gospel of John, here it is used not of the disciple remaining in Christ or of God's gift remaining in the disciple, but rather of the guilt of these men (or, in Brown, their "sin") remaining - language which for Brown recalls the talk in Mark 3. 29 about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, for which there will be no

forgiveness, or the mention in 1 John 4. 16 of a "sin unto death". We are without a doubt expected to see the unbelief of these men as "sin", although they would not see it in this way, for they were far more prepared to regard the blind man - and Jesus himself - as sinners. This is a point taken up by Stibbe when he says that there is more discussion about sin in chapter 9 than in the entire Gospel so far. "The point being made", he goes on, "is that the Pharisees/Jews see sin as breaking (in this instance) Sabbath laws, whereas the protagonist and the narrator see sin as unbelief about Jesus".⁹⁸ One cannot help but feel that this story has, as it were, come full circle; it began with a discussion about whose sin was responsible for the congenital blindness of this man who used to beg, and it ends with the religious leaders, who might well have regarded that blind man as a "sinner", themselves being accused of a culpable blindness and the "sin" of unbelief in the Son of man. The formerly blind man, then, has come to see and to believe who Jesus is; those who stand in opposition to him in this story have shown no powers of spiritual discernment whatsoever, for they have moved in the opposite direction until their hearts are hardened against Jesus altogether. These Pharisees, Hoskyns claims, "thus pass out of the story blind, but claiming authority to teach the world and therefore abiding in sin", adding the reminder from Matthew 6. 23 - *"If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness"*⁹⁹

In a most remarkable chapter, then, skilfully constructed and full of dramatic interest, John has presented us with the response of the once blind man to Jesus. This response is seen to be a positive response, made against a

background of conflict and veiled threats and the opposition of those whose response to Jesus is wholly negative. This man has come to "see" Jesus, both physically and spiritually, and has come to a point where he is ready and able to confess his faith, even in the face of possible opposition and danger - to make a courageous stand as he declares, "Lord, I believe". As we have traced the man's progress towards faith, recognizing Jesus as "the man called Jesus", then as "a prophet", then "from God" until he finally confesses, "Lord, I believe", we have been able to see this man alongside others in this Gospel who are shown encountering Jesus, like the Samaritan woman from chapter 4 and the lame man from chapter 5. We may also now be able to see his response to Jesus alongside of those responses we have already considered in some detail - the responses of Nicodemus and Pilate.

When we looked at Nicodemus we found ourselves disturbed by those "mixed signals" which Bassler described, by data which refused to fall neatly into place, by a man who seemed to be making some sort of response to Jesus - coming to ask questions, defending Jesus against unfair treatment, by the end of the Gospel prepared to be publicly associated with Joseph of Arimathea in the burial rites for Jesus - and yet leaving us wondering whether that response was not still incomplete, especially in a Gospel which seems to demand wholehearted commitment. Nicodemus never really appeared to leave "the world" behind altogether - and John's presentation of him has led some, like Martyn, to see him as a representative of those secret believers in the Johannine church who were not ready to come out fully in terms of a complete and public

declaration of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. When we look at our blind man in chapter 9 alongside of Nicodemus, then the contrast is clear enough - for the once blind man does not keep "one foot in each world"¹⁰⁰, as Bassler suggested about Nicodemus; this man came to a point where he was ready to risk whatever might come as a result of his confession of faith. We do not find ourselves with any of the doubts and fears which we battled with concerning the response of Nicodemus - for this man's progress is clearly charted, along with the treatment he received from "the Jews".

With Pilate, too, there were questions raised about John's presentation of the encounter and Pilate's response to Jesus. Was John seeking to present Pilate engaging in the sort of dialogue with Jesus which might lead to some sort of positive response? Did Pilate at least begin to "see" for himself something of the identity or the origin of Jesus? Did he catch just a glimpse of the glory? Perhaps he did - but again, in terms of the sort of discipleship called for in this Gospel of John, it was not a clear or a complete response, and in no way does it compare with the response of our blind man in chapter 9. He catches more than just a glimpse; although he may still have much to learn at the end of the chapter, he has shown himself willing to suffer for what he knows to be true ("one thing I know") - and alongside of him Pilate does not seem so very brave at all.

Is our blind man, then, to be seen as an example of the right sort of response to Jesus, as far as this Gospel of John is concerned? Can his response be held up

as one that is full and complete and courageous, which risks danger and opposition? What do we make of those suggestions, which we met along the way (cf. page 126), that there may be "a further progression" to come - in the declaration made by Thomas in 20: 27-29 ("My Lord and my God"). We found this suggestion earlier in the commentary of Schnackenburg, quoted earlier, and it is echoed in a comment from Carson who sees the "Christological confessions" of this Gospel coming to a climax with Thomas' words in 20: 28. Is the confession of faith which we hear from the formerly blind man in some ways a lesser confession of faith - "Lord, I believe", followed by the attitude of worship? We need to recall that Thomas' confession is a post-Resurrection confession of faith - faith in the Risen Christ - and that it is a confession of faith from one who was part of the circle of disciples. Is not the confession of chapter 9, from a healed blind beggar, who began with only the knowledge that this was a "man called Jesus", and who came to faith against opposition and danger, just as full and sufficient in its own way? Are we not to see in this man an example of Christian commitment, of "seeing" and "believing", of the kind of spiritual discernment which John longs for all of his readers to possess, as they encounter a Gospel which was written expressly "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20: 31)?

It is the claim of this thesis that in this story of the blind man healed by Jesus we have a clear example of that very spiritual discernment which John seeks for his readers. Here is a man who in the course of his encounter with Jesus not

only receives physical sight but also comes to see, gradually as the story progresses, that his healer is indeed the one who came down from heaven to be the "Light of the World". His final confession here, "Lord, I believe", and his response in worship, surely make clear that he sees in Jesus the Christ, sees in Jesus something of the One who sent him (... "and he who sees me sees him who sent me" 12. 45). In the next - and final - chapter, I hope to explore a little further the central significance in this Gospel of this theme of coming to see who Jesus is, the significance in this Gospel of those various encounters with Jesus and the responses made by the individuals concerned, and the way in which even an introductory study of these encounters opens up the whole question of faith responses and some of the questions and issues already raised in our study.

- 1 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 356
- 2 Carson, *The Gospel according to John* p. 361
- 3 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 356
- 4 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 341
- 5 Newbigin, *The Light has Come* p. 119
- 6 Bruce, *The Gospel of John* p. 208
- 7 Newbigin, *The Light has Come* p. 119
- 8 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 342
- 9 Bligh, "The Man Born Blind" p. 131
- 10 Grayston, *The Gospel of John* p. 81
- 11 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 356
- 12 Brown, *John* p. 371
- 13 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 356
- 14 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 331
- 15 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 342
- 16 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 343
- 17 Bruce, *The Gospel of John* p. 209
- 18 Bligh, "The Man Born Blind" p. 133
- 19 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 155
- 20 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* pp. 357-358
- 21 Newbigin, *The Light has Come* p. 121
- 22 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* pp. 358
- 23 Newbigin, *The Light has Come* p. 121
- 24 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 243
- 25 Dodd, *Historical Tradition* p. 183
- 26 Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* p. 354
- 27 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 139
- 28 Martyn, *History and Theology* p. 26 ff.
- 29 Dodd, *Interpretation* p. 357
- 30 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 246
- 31 Newbigin, *The Light has Come* p. 121
- 32 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 345
- 33 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 359
- 34 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* p. 247
- 35 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 156
- 36 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 156
- 37 Carson, *The Gospel according to John* p. 366
- 38 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 334
- 39 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 338
- 40 Brown, *John* p. 373
- 41 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 335
- 42 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 157
- 43 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 346
- 44 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 360
- 45 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 71-2
- 46 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 72
- 47 Carson, *The Gospel according to John* p. 368
- 48 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 361
- 49 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* p. 249

- 50 Newbigin, *The Light has Come* p. 122
- 51 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 158
- 52 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 335
- 53 Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* p. 357
- 54 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 158
- 55 Brown, *John* p. 374
- 56 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 362
- 57 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 251
- 58 Bligh, "The Man Born Blind" p.140
- 59 Carson, *The Gospel according to John* p. 373
- 60 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 336
- 61 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 251
- 62 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 362
- 63 Pryor, *Jesus: Evangelist of the Covenant People* p. 41
- 64 Bruce, *The Gospel of John* p. 218
- 65 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 74
- 66 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 337
- 67 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 252
- 68 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 159
- 69 Bligh, "The Man Born Blind" p.141
- 70 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 253
- 71 Bruce, *The Gospel of John* p. 219
- 72 Temple, *Readings* p. 160
- 73 Barclay, *The Gospel of John Vol.2* p. 49
- 74 Brown, *John* p. 375
- 75 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 364
- 76 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 253
- 77 Fenton, *The Gospel according to John* pp. 23-25
- 78 Brown, *John* p. 375
- 79 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 350
- 80 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 254
- 81 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 159
- 82 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 365
- 83 Beasley-Murray, *John* p. 159
- 84 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 339
- 85 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 75
- 86 Porter, "John IX. 38, 39a: A Liturgical Addition" especially p. 390f.
- 87 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 140
- 88 Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* p. 359
- 89 Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* p. 341
- 90 Stibbe, *John* pp. 108-109
- 91 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 255
- 92 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 366
- 93 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 255
- 94 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 75
- 95 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 75
- 96 Countryman, *Mystical Way* p. 75-6
- 97 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 366
- 98 Stibbe, *John* p. 110

- ⁹⁹ Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*. p. 360
¹⁰⁰ Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 646

Chapter 6. Coming to See who Jesus Really Is: Encounters, Responses,
Questions.

At the centre of this thesis is the claim that at the heart of this Gospel of John there is a concern that men and women should "come to see" who Jesus really is, and then make a response of faith - come to believe that he is "the Christ, the Son of God" - a profound and life-changing experience which may also lead to a confession of that faith, a witnessing to Jesus as the Son of God, the Lord. For the writer of this Gospel there is, surely, no doubt who Jesus really is - or what his own Gospel is all about. It is all about the one who came down from heaven to be the Light of the World, the True Bread from Heaven, the Good Shepherd, the Real Vine ... the one whose real "glory" was truly to be seen when he was "lifted up" on the cross, giving his life to open up the way to the Father for those who believe in him (prefigured, perhaps, in Jesus' words to Nathanael as early as 1. 51), and showing - to all who had eyes to see - the Father's love for the world. John clearly wants others to come to "see" for themselves who Jesus really is, and in him to see the One who sent him, the Father who loved the world so much. He therefore sets down his written record of some of the signs performed by Jesus - a record set down, he says, quite clearly, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (20. 31) Whether this Gospel was written as a missionary tract to inspire faith in those who have not yet believed in Jesus, or as an encouragement to believers to grow in their faith, there can be no doubt that this Gospel's purpose is to lead men and women to

see and believe that Jesus is the Son of God. In this written record John gives a good deal of time and space - in a way that is quite different from the other Gospel records - to recounting a series of encounters which Jesus has with a great variety of individuals: men and women, important folk (like Nicodemus and the "official" whose son was ill) and those (like the Samaritan woman and the blind man) who might well have been regarded by some as rather less important, some who came to him and others (like the lame man and the Samaritan woman) who found that Jesus took the initiative in their encounters with him.

In the Introduction to this present study, I mentioned not only my growing fascination with this Gospel, but also my great interest in this whole area of how John shows us individuals "coming" to Jesus, or encountering him in the course of their lives, sometimes quite unexpectedly, and how John shows us the different ways in which they respond to their encounter with him: some of them responding in a positive way, coming to "see" who Jesus really is, and having the courage to say so, others coming to "see" just a little, catching perhaps just a glimpse of the "glory" of the one who is speaking with them or bringing his healing power to bear on their condition - and others who do not appear to "see" at all, and either remain unmoved by the encounter or openly oppose any claim that Jesus makes about himself or that others make about him. I have come more and more to consider these encounters to be a very special feature of this Gospel of John - a feature which in many ways embodies and reflects a central theme of the whole work: that each individual who

encounters Jesus has to make a decision about who he is. In this sense the coming of Jesus into the world might be regarded as bringing about something of a *krisis* for humankind - and this Gospel does not shirk saying so. Even in the first chapter, the Prologue speaks of the coming of the one who is the "true light" and makes it clear that some would "receive" him and others would not (1. 9-12), and throughout the Gospel the distinction is clear between those who come to the light and walk in the light (3. 21, 8. 12, 12. 35, 46-47) and those who prefer darkness and will not come to the light (3. 19-20). Lindars, speaking of the Gospel of John as a "book with a message", in which the writer wants "to bring the reader to the point of decision", suggests that "the decision between the light and the darkness affects a man's whole existence."¹

So, as each individual - or group - encounters Jesus, we wait to discover whether they will simply see "the man called Jesus", or whether they will really "see" who he is - and then whether they will choose to walk in his light. Dodd speaks of this division between that simple physical vision and the deeper vision that comes with faith. Speaking first of that simple physical vision, he says: "Many of the contemporaries of Jesus saw him in this sense, but without any saving effects. But when simple vision is accompanied by faith, it leads to vision in a deeper sense". He goes on to suggest that faith is "a form of vision", and says that "when Christ was on earth, to have faith was to 'see His glory' - to apprehend and acknowledge the deity through the veil of humanity", and then he looks to a broader time-scale when he continues ... "Now that He is no longer visible to the bodily eye, faith remains the capacity for seeing His

glory"². The opportunity to come to "see" who Jesus really is, and to make a faith response is still, then, a real possibility - a "live issue" - for humankind.

Throughout this study I have also sought to open up at least two of the questions which are important for many people whenever we come to consider such faith responses, and the attitude of the writer of the Gospel to such responses: the question of whether the decision of faith, the choice to "walk in the light" is always simply a free choice, or whether faith is a "gift", whether faith is more about God's initiative in "drawing" men and women to Himself, or more about human response to God's loving concern for humankind and then the question about whether such a positive decision in favour of Jesus, a decision to walk in the light which he brings, has to be total and complete, whether partial or incomplete faith has any validity at all. We will return to these questions before we conclude.

We return now, however, to that issue of the central significance of these various encounters with Jesus recorded in this Gospel of John. If it is true that one of the central themes of this Gospel is how - and how far - individuals come to "see" and to "believe", then could it be, as Culpepper suggests, that each of these episodes in which Jesus is encountered "has essentially the same plot as the story as a whole", and that as we wait to see whether Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman or the lame man or Pilate will recognize Jesus and thereby receive eternal life "the story is repeated over and over"³? This is an idea which has interested me for some time, and one which seems worthy of

further exploration. If we consider the varied nature of the characters involved in these encounters with Jesus - and the varying responses which they make - then we might come to agree with Culpepper that they are all "particular sorts of choosers"⁴, although we might find that his contention that "given the pervasive dualism of the Fourth Gospel" the choice is either/or and therefore "all situations are reduced to two clear-cut alternatives" so that all characters eventually make their choice⁵, leaves little hope for those - like Nicodemus and Pilate - who are not seen making a final "clear-cut" choice in this Gospel record ... and who might therefore, given this interpretation, be seen as having rejected Jesus - rather than as having seen a little, perhaps just a glimpse, of the glory of the "Word made flesh".

Other commentators on this Gospel have also found this notion - that in each episode the central question is about whether Jesus' real identity will be discovered - to have a certain validity for their study of the Gospel. We have already, in chapter two, noted Stibbe's "key question to every episode - Will characters recognize who Jesus really is?"⁶ and we find Dodd, as he draws his conclusions about the "Book of Signs" maintaining that "each several act of Christ contains the whole truth of the Gospel" and that "each several episode ... contains in itself, implicitly, the whole of the Gospel."⁷ Such suggestions would certainly lend support to the present notion, and to our major premise, that this Gospel is all about "coming to see who Jesus really is", and making a response to him.

During the course of this study we have, surely, witnessed this happening over and over again. Sometimes we have witnessed a character encountering Jesus, talking with him, listening to him, receiving from him, and gradually coming to realize something, at least, of the truth about his identity - and then in their own way seeking to express something of the way in which they now "see" him so Nathanael says "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (1. 49), Martha says "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world" (11. 27), Thomas says "My Lord and my God" (20. 28) and the once blind man says "The man called Jesus He is a prophet Lord, I believe" (9. 11, 17, 38). In the case of each of them there is the real sense that, as a result of their own encounter with Jesus, they have come to realize that in him they are "seeing" something of the nature of God, something of the "glory" of the Word of God made flesh and dwelling among them on earth. They have come to "see" and "believe". This thesis would suggest that in the story of the blind man in chapter 9 John has given us a particularly clear example of an encounter which results in this sort of positive response - perhaps the most powerful of such stories in the Gospel. This man encounters Jesus, receives the physical sight of his eyes, which he had never known before, comes gradually to recognize that his healer is the Lord and worthy of worship - and, in the face of opposition and threats, and even in the presence of those who cannot or will not see what he sees, makes a declaration of faith which I have already suggested is as positive and as "complete" as any other in this Gospel. Surely here, in the story of the blind man - and in the other "positive" responses to Jesus which John records for us - we have what John

would wish for all of his readers - the positive response of faith to a real enlightenment.

Others do not seem to make any positive response at all, as a result of their encounters with Jesus. When Culpepper says that "at a wedding and at a well, at the temple among the religious and at a pool among the wretched and lame, ordinary persons come step by step to recognize glory enfleshed"⁸, he is surely wrong if he intends to suggest that the lame man whose healing is recorded in chapter 5 of the Gospel comes to recognize Jesus' real identity in the same way as, say, the Samaritan woman or the man born blind. There would seem to be no evidence at all in this chapter that the formerly lame man healed by Jesus at the pool "by the Sheep Gate" makes any meaningful discovery about the real identity of his healer - or makes any response at all. The only words and actions recorded are his complaints about having no one to help him into the pool, his readiness to blame "the man" who healed him for the fact that he was carrying his pallet on the Sabbath - and then his readiness to reveal the identity of his healer to the Jews as soon as he discovered it, although Brodie suggests that the man's action in going to the Jews here might be "sufficiently ambiguous to be open to a positive interpretation", that "the man has finally come to mature (repentant) recognition of Jesus, and he is announcing the good news to the Jews"⁹. There is nothing here of recognition of the "glory", nothing here of the "vision" that comes with faith, to use Dodd's imagery, nothing more than an awareness that "a man called Jesus" healed him. The man's encounter with Jesus seems to have no effect upon him beyond the healing of his paralysis:

there is not even a sense of gratitude for that. It is no wonder that so many commentators point to the clear contrast between this man and chapter 9's blind man in their responses to their encounters with Jesus. Here, surely, is an example of one whose encounter with Jesus leaves him unmoved - typical, perhaps, of individuals who simply see "the man called Jesus", a man amongst men - and nothing more.

Others still, in this Gospel of John, see Jesus with their physical sight and are not just unmoved by what they see him do and hear him say - they come to the point where they are actively seeking to destroy him. For them, the Light which has come in Jesus is most unwelcome, and they do not want to open their eyes to the light he is bringing into the world, or "see" what it might reveal to them of his true identity. In John's Gospel this attitude is, of course, most clearly seen in the group he calls "the Jews", "the title regularly given by John to Judaism and its official leaders, who stand over against Jesus"¹⁰, according to Barrett. We are surely correct to identify this group, as Ashton does, as being "not the people of Jerusalem or Judea, still less the Jewish nation as a whole, but simply the men with the power and influence that entitle them to speak on behalf of everybody else."¹¹ They have several "encounters" with Jesus throughout the course of John's narrative. Early in the Gospel they are found questioning Jesus, after his "cleansing" of the Temple (2. 18). After chapter 5's healing, however, they are set upon persecuting Jesus and seek to kill him, "because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God" (5. 18). This opposition continues; again, at the

beginning of chapter 7 we are told again that the Jews "sought to kill him" - although this chapter ends with that concern from Nicodemus that he should have a fair trial, and chapter 8 has Jesus addressing not just those who opposed him, but also "the Jews who had believed in him" (8. 31). Our earlier study of chapter 9 outlined their part in that episode and their growing disbelief, and by the end of John's account of Jesus public ministry it is so very clear - as Culpepper puts it - that "Jesus has come to his own, and his own have not received him" ... although, he does add, "some have".¹²

"The Jews", then, for the most part, are shown as opposed to Jesus, critical of his ministry, constantly looking out for things they can condemn - like his lack of respect for sabbath regulations, and what they see as his blasphemous attitude to God. Their several encounters with Jesus do not bring them any closer to "seeing" who he really is, or responding to him in a positive way. On the contrary, they seem to be regarded as those who will not "see" even the evidence which is before their eyes, as the hungry are fed and the sick are healed; their "blindness" is, perhaps, most clearly seen in chapter 9 - in direct contrast to the growing insight of the formerly blind man. Over and over again, in their encounters with Jesus, we are made aware of the fact that they seem to stand in direct opposition to Jesus. The evidence for this comes sometimes from them, as they draw contrasts between themselves and Jesus and his followers: "You are his disciples, but we are disciples of Moses" (9. 28) - but often it comes from Jesus himself, as he speaks to them about what he calls "your law" (8. 17), and declares , "You are from below, I am from above; you

are of this world, I am not of this world" (8. 23) - as if he sees them as occupying a position diametrically opposed to him and all that he represents. Ashton is surely right in seeing here "the specifically *religious* nature of the antagonism between Jesus and the Jews in the Fourth Gospel".¹³ Brown points out that, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John does not attack the Pharisees or the Jews for hypocrisy or for their moral or social behaviour, but that "the whole attack on them centers on their refusal to believe in Jesus and their desire to kill him".¹⁴ In the eyes of the writer of this Gospel, then, it would appear that the people he calls "the Jews" will never come to see who Jesus really is - never come to believe in him - that here he presents with a picture of those whose several encounters with Jesus throughout the course of this Gospel's narrative do not just leave them unmoved by their meetings, but actually move them to oppose him more and more - until, in the end, they are determined to destroy him.

In the light of our exploration of some of the questions we have already raised about faith responses, and what this Gospel has to say about them, we might want to ask whether "the Jews" in this Gospel are entirely responsible for their utter lack of faith in Jesus - or whether they are made to carry what Culpepper has called a "burden of unbelief". He does see this "burden" as being relieved in two ways, however: firstly, by the fact that John affirms that "belief must be given" (6. 37, 39) and that "believers must be called or drawn" (10. 3, 6. 44,65), and secondly, as we have already noted, that "some of the Jews do believe" (8. 31, 11. 45). This notion of Culpepper's that "the Jews carry the

unbelief of 'the world'"¹⁵ in this Gospel opens up again one of our questions about faith - that if faith is a gift, how far can those who are not given that gift be held responsible for their lack of belief? If we are thinking particularly of "the Jews" in this Gospel of John, we might be asking whether they have not been "drawn" by God, and if not, why not, if God's love is, as this Gospel declares, for all the world? Is it that God has sought to draw them, and they have resisted - that they might have been able to see something of the "glory" in Jesus, but have deliberately chosen to close their eye to it, because they did not want to face the penetrating light which might have exposed their prejudice and pride, or have they been "given" a very specific role to play in this Gospel in opposition to Jesus? We are back with those questions about the initiative of God and the response of men and women. If it might even be possible that "the Jews" here are carrying such a "burden" of unbelief, which they are incapable of shedding, then we would be right, surely, to feel sympathy for them, in the role they had to play, rather than blaming them for their out-and-out hostility to Jesus. Commenting on Bultmann's description of the Jews in John's Gospel as the representatives of unbelief, Ashton speaks of their role in this Gospel as being "to represent and symbolize human obduracy and incomprehension when confronted with the revelation of Jesus."¹⁶ If this is true, then they certainly play out the role allotted to them with a great measure of success. In their encounters with Jesus, their response seems so much more destructive than the apparent apathy of the lame man - for they cannot allow Jesus to live and set out to destroy him.

Having considered again the encounters with Jesus which lead to positive decisions and responses of faith, and those which lead to no apparent response, or to a purely hostile reaction, we might, perhaps, pause for just a moment to go back to those other two characters whose meetings with Jesus we examined in some detail during the course of this study and which left us with no real definitive answers. Are we to apply to Nicodemus - and to Pilate - the term which Bassler applied to Nicodemus, Bassler's *tertium quid*¹⁷, different from the Jews, but distinct from the disciples? With this "ruler of the Jews" and this Roman governor, it has proved difficult for us to say categorically whether they were even "on the way" to seeing and believing.

As far as Nicodemus is concerned, we must perhaps go along with Bassler's *mixed signals*; here is a Jewish leader who comes to talk with Jesus - and to ask questions, who seeks to defend Jesus against unjust treatment by his fellows, who joins Joseph of Arimathea in providing a traditional burial for Jesus and yet, as the Gospel narrative comes to a close, we are still not really sure where Nicodemus stands, so to speak. We may want to think of him as having some awareness of the real identity of Jesus, or at least a mind open enough to want to approach Jesus to talk to him and ask questions, with enough courage to seek to defend Jesus against injustice, and a desire to come back again and to show respect for Jesus in death. We may want to think of him as perhaps "on the way" to faith, even though we have no evidence from the Gospel to suggest any declaration of the kind which we have heard from others, like Thomas or Martha, or our blind man. Do we see him as a man of

"inadequate" faith, perhaps - or a man simply not brave enough to stand up and be counted among the disciples?

Pilate's encounter with Jesus is also, in its own way, inconclusive. During the trial scenes, is Pilate merely "listening to Jesus' voice, but not hearing his words" - and therefore showing that he is not "of the truth", as Ashton suggests¹⁸, or is there some truth in Lindars' claim, which we examined more fully in chapter 3 of this study, that Pilate's "Here is your king!" is "almost a confession of faith", because he cannot deny that Jesus is King "in a sense which impresses and terrifies him."¹⁹ One of the lasting impressions of the encounter between Pilate and Jesus for many readers of this Gospel must surely be the way in which Pilate is seen coming and going, back and forth, moving between his conversations with Jesus inside the building and his conversations with "the Jews" outside which may well be a deliberate attempt by the writer to mirror the turmoil of his spirit, as he wrestles with his conscience. I find myself agreeing with Brown's image of the Johannine Pilate "not as a personification of the State, but as another representative of a reaction to Jesus that is neither faith nor rejection"²⁰. Brown goes on to describe Pilate as typical, "not of the State that would remain neutral, but of the many honest, well-disposed men who would try to adopt a middle position in a struggle that is total", and suggests "many are those who can find mirrored in Pilate their own tragic history of temporizing and indecision".²¹ Many of us feel, perhaps, that there is something "tragic" about Pilate's unwillingness to decide in favour of "the Truth"; if, in fact, he did "see" a glimpse of the truth about Jesus, a

"glimpse of "the glory" of the "Word made flesh", there is a deep sadness about his failure to do anything about it, to declare any allegiance to the truth, or to admit to any awareness of "the glory".

So our studies of the encounters of Nicodemus and Pilate with Jesus leave us with many questions unanswered, about the nature of their responses to Jesus - and the validity of any response that is less than positive, any allegiance that is less than total. In terms of this Gospel of John, and its value system, there is always that sense that it is darkness **or** light, faith **or** rejection, above **or** below ... and we wonder if John had any sympathy with Nicodemus and Pilate. Many of us, however, **are** able to sympathize with them, because we recognize in their wrestling and their struggling, in their prevaricating and in their possible cowardice, qualities all too common in our human experience, in our own lives and in the lives of other people. We are back with our second question about faith responses, the question of whether a response to God in Jesus Christ has to be total and unconditional in order to have any validity or worth - or whether there is a place for those who are maybe "on the way" to faith, who have, perhaps, just caught a glimpse of something that is special or different about Jesus, and want to know more, but who have not yet seen his "glory", not yet seen that he is "from above", or do not yet have the courage to speak openly about even their limited "vision"? This Gospel of John so often seems to give the impression that there is no "middle ground", that it is, as Culpepper suggests, always "two clear-cut alternatives"²², either/or, that we might begin to wonder what hope there is for those who are not yet sure, not yet able to

declare complete faith in Jesus as the Son of God. However, even in this Gospel record, men and women come to complete faith **by way of** partial faith. Faith based on "signs" seems often to be criticised as inadequate, as when John says that Jesus would not entrust himself to those who "believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did" (2. 23-24), or when Jesus says to the official whose son was ill, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" (4. 48), and yet surely many of his disciples began to believe because they saw those signs which he did - as at Cana (2. 11), and surely the writer of this Gospel sets out to tell us about the "signs" in order to help us on our faith journey (20. 30-31). This Gospel record would also surely witness to the fact that the actions of these disciples "on the way" to faith often revealed a less than perfect understanding about the nature of Jesus and his kingdom, as when they marvelled to find him talking with a woman (4. 27), or when Peter was reluctant to allow Jesus to wash his feet (13. 6-10), or when he drew his sword in the garden and struck the high priest's slave (18. 10). Sometimes they lacked courage - Peter had enough courage to follow when Jesus was taken away, but not enough to confess his relationship to the Lord (18. 15-18, 25-27), and sometimes they demanded to "see" the evidence with their own eyes before they would believe what the others had told them - like Thomas in the upper room (20. 24-29). In every age, surely, many - perhaps most - come to fuller faith and fuller understanding by way of questioning and wrestling, by way of doubts and uncertainties and incomplete understanding and imperfect "vision" - and we are surely right to believe that God, who made men and women with the capacity to reason and to question, will accept honest questioning and

honest doubt in those who are searching, as opposed to deliberate rejection or a refusal even to consider the evidence before one's eyes. Perhaps our examination of these encounters, between Nicodemus and Pilate and Jesus have helped us to explore that second question a little - the question about partial or what might appear to be "inadequate" faith - a question which will surely always be a "live issue" - for our human understanding of the nature of faith responses will always be as incomplete and partial as many of those responses are.

The first of those questions we have encountered again and again as we have considered these various encounters with Jesus recorded by John. The question about whether "the Jews" in this Gospel carry a "burden of unbelief", the question about whether that lame man is entirely to blame for his apparent lack of response to Jesus, the questions about the (perhaps) inadequate or partial response of some like Nicodemus and Pilate - they all illustrate that question, first raised in chapter 1 of this study, about whether faith is a gift, and if it is, whether it is always given to those who seek it, and how far any individual can be held responsible if they do not appear able or willing to believe. Approaching the question from the opposite angle, we would also have to ask how far any individual is "responsible" for any positive response to God in Jesus - for if faith is essentially a gift, if a man or a woman comes to believe in Jesus as a result of God "drawing them", then they perhaps have little to do except to allow themselves to be drawn. Perhaps the answer - or a possible answer - to our dilemma can be found within the thoughts of Bultmann and

Kummel quoted in that first chapter. Perhaps we could accept that God's "drawing" of an individual is not in any sense a denial of that individual's freedom to accept or reject what God offers, but rather a first movement - a movement of God's grace and favour towards humankind, and therefore essentially a "gift" - and that a man or a woman's "coming" to Jesus, "coming" to faith in him, is an act of free will in response to that movement of God towards him or her and that the exact timing or any interdependence between these two - and that the question of why faith appears to come more easily to some than to others, why some can see and believe more readily than others - are all part of the tension that we must simply live with as part of our human condition and its imperfect understanding.

The essential message of this Gospel of John, however, is clearly that it is possible for men and women to come to see who Jesus really is, to come to see that Jesus is the Son of God, and to come to a point where they not only believe that but are able to declare it, in their own way and in their own time. Some take longer than others to come to a position of faith, and some are braver than others in declaring their faith and allegiance. From the very first chapter, when we hear John the Baptist declare, "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God", to chapter 20, when we hear Thomas say, "My Lord and my God", throughout the Gospel narrative we witness individuals encountering Jesus and finding themselves responding in a positive manner, as they "see" who he really is. Just as this thesis would maintain that at the heart of this Gospel there is a concern that men and women should come to

this recognition of who Jesus really is, so we would also suggest that at the heart of the Gospel's narrative we find the story which in a very special way illustrates that central concern and central message: a story about a man blind from birth whom Jesus encounters as he "passes by", a blind man who receives the gift of physical sight - and then, gradually, as the encounter proceeds scene by scene, receives a much greater enlightenment. As he answers questions from his neighbours and speaks with them about the "man called Jesus", as he finds himself interrogated by the Pharisees, who themselves cannot agree whether this man Jesus is "a sinner", and finds himself declaring Jesus to be "a prophet", as his parents refuse any responsibility and he finds himself engaged in another exchange with the religious authorities who cannot or will not see what is happening before their very eyes, as he finds himself again "encountered" by Jesus, this man at the centre of our story comes to "see" and to "believe" for himself who Jesus really is - and is moved to worship him. Here is a story about sight and blindness - a story in which, as Barrett suggests, "John has with unsurpassed artistry and with profound theological insight brought out one of the major themes of the Christian faith".²³ In a Gospel so full of the language of "seeing" and "believing", of the coming of the Light into the World and the invitation to men and women to respond in faith, this story, surely, shows us something of what this Gospel is all about - Seeing and Believing - discerning who Jesus is and responding in faith.

- 1 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 24
- 2 Dodd, *Interpretation* pp. 185-186
- 3 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 89
- 4 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 104
- 5 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 104
- 6 Stibbe, *John* pp. 204-205?
- 7 Dodd, *Interpretation* pp. 383-384
- 8 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 97
- 9 Brodie, *The Gospel According to John* p. 238
- 10 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 171
- 11 Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* p. 132
- 12 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 128
- 13 Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* p. 134
- 14 Brown, *John* p. LXXII
- 15 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 130
- 16 Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* p. 135
- 17 Bassler, "Mixed Signals" p. 646
- 18 Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* p. 227
- 19 Lindars, *The Gospel of John* p. 572
- 20 Brown, *John* p. 864
- 21 Brown, *John* p. 864
- 22 Culpepper, *Anatomy* p. 104
- 23 Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* p. 355.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, J. E. "Why Pilate?"
from *The Trial of Jesus. Cambridge Studies in Honour of C.F.D. Moule* ed. E. Bammel. London S.C.M. 1970
- Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative.*
New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981
- Ashton, J. *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*
Oxford University Press 1991
- Barclay, W. *The Gospel of John* 2 Volumes
Edinburgh: St. Andrew's Press. Revised Edition 1975
- Barrett, C. K. *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text.* 2d ed.
SPCK 1978
- Barrett, C. K. *Essays on John.* London S.P.C.K. 1982
- Barton, S. C. "Can We Identify the Gospel Audiences?"
in *The Gospels for All Christians*", ed. R. Bauckham.
Edinburgh T. & T. Clark 1998
- Bassler, J. M. "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel"
in *JBL* 108/4 (1989), 635-646
- Bauckham, R. "For Whom Were Gospels Written?"
in *The Gospels for All Christians*", ed. R. Bauckham.
Edinburgh T. & T. Clark 1998
- Beasley-Murray, G.R. *John* WBC 26 Word Books 1987
- Bligh, J. "The Man Born Blind"
in *Heythrop Journal* 7 (1966) pp 129-144
- Brodie, T. L. *The Gospel According to John. A Literary and Theological Commentary.*
Oxford University Press 1993
- Brown, R. E. *The Gospel According to John.* Anchor Bible 2 vols.
New York Doubleday, 1970

- Brown, R. E. *The Death of the Messiah* 2 vols.
Anchor Bible Reference Library
New York Doubleday 1993
- Bruce, F. F. *The Gospel of John*
Grand Rapids William B. Eerdmans 1983
- Bultmann, R. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary.*
Eng. trans. G. R. Beasley Murray.
Basil Blackwell, 1971
- Bultmann, R. *Theology of the New Testament* Volume Two
S.C.M. Press 1955
- Burridge, R. A. "About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre
and Audiences"
in *The Gospels for All Christians*", ed. R. Bauckham.
Edinburgh T. & T. Clark 1998
- Carson, D. A. *The Gospel according to St. John*
Leicester, England and Grand Rapids, U.S.A.:
Inter-Varsity Press 1991
- Collins, R. F. "Representative Figures in the Fourth Gospel"
in *Downside Review*, 94 (1976) 26-46
- Collins, R. F. "Jesus' Conversation with Nicodemus"
in *The Bible Today* 93 (1977) 1409-19
- Countryman, L. W. *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel.*
Trinity Press International, 1994
- Culpepper, R. A. *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel.*
Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983
- Dodd, C. H. *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.*
New York and Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1963
- Dodd, C. H. *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel.*
Cambridge University Press 1963
- English, D. *The Meaning of the Warmed Heart.*
Methodist Church Home Mission Division, 1987
- Fenton, J. *The Gospel according to John* New Clarendon Bible
Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994

- Fenton, J. *Finding the Way through John*. Mowbray, 1995
- Giblin, C. H. "John's Narrative of the Hearing Before Pilate" in *Biblica* 67 (1986) 221-239
- Grayston, K. *The Gospel of John* London: Epworth Press 1990
- Hoskyns, E. C. *The Fourth Gospel*, Edited by F. N. Davey. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1940
- Kummel, W.G. *The Theology of the New Testament*. SCM Press 1974
- Lampe, G.W.H. "The Trial of Jesus in the *Acta Pilati*" in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* ed. E. Bammel and C.F.D. Moule. Cambridge C. U. P. 1984
- Lindars, B. *The Gospel of John* New Century Bible, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981: London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1972
- Lightfoot, R. H. *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary* ed. C.F. Evans Oxford at the Clarendon Press 1956
- Martyn, J. L. *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. Revised Edition Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979
- Meeks, W. A. "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism" in *JBL*, vol 91 (1972)
- Moloney, F. J. "From Cana to Cana (Jn. 2:1-4:54) and the Fourth Evangelist's Concept of Correct (and Incorrect) Faith" in *Salesianum* 40 (1978) 817-843
- Newbigin, L. *The Light has Come - An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1982 The Handsel Press, 1987
- Porter, C. L. "John 9: 38, 39a: A Liturgical Address to the Text" *NTS New Testament Studies* 13 (1967) pp. 387-394
- Pryor, J. W. *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1992
- Rensberger, D. "The Politics of John: The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel" in *J. B. L. (103)* 1984 395-411

- Sanders, J. N. *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*
edited and completed by B.A. Mastin.
London A.&C. Black 1968
- Schnackenburg, R. *The Gospel according to St. John*,
tr. by K. Smyth, C. Hastings and others, 3 volumes
Burns and Oates, 1968-82 (Vol. 4 only in German)
- Schneider, S. M. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*.
San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1991
- Smalley, S. S. *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*
Guernsey: The Paternoster Press 1978
- Stibbe, M. W. G. *John*. JSOT Press 1993
- Stibbe, M. W. G. *John's Gospel* London and New York: Routledge 1994
- Stibbe, M. W. G. *John as Storyteller*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994
- Tasker, R. V. G. *The Gospel according to St. John*
Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press 1960
- Temple, W. *Readings in St. John's Gospel*. 2 vols.
London: MacMillan 1939, 1940.
- Verney, S. *Water into Wine: An Introduction to John's Gospel*
London: Fount Paperbacks 1989
- Watson, F. "Towards a Literal Reading of the Gospels"
in *The Gospels for All Christians*, ed. R. Bauckham.
Edinburgh T. & T. Clark 1998
- Westcott, B.F. *The Gospel according to St. John: The Authorised Version with Introduction and Notes*
London: John Murray, Albermarle Street 1894

